

ICT in varied language learning environments: Selected papers from EUROCALL 1999

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This special issue offers a selection of papers presented at the 1999 annual EUROCALL conference, held last September in Besançon, France. Although CALL has a deep rooted tradition in France, EUROCALL'99 was the first large scale international CALL conference to take place in this country. Initiated by the European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning and the French speaking CALL journal ALSIC (2000), the conference attracted more than 370 full participants coming from 30 countries.

The main theme of the conference was 'Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in varied language learning environments'. The idea was to study the specific contribution of ICT to learning environments such as Continuing or Life-long Education, Vocational Training, Open and Distance Learning, Language Classrooms, etc. After the call for papers we received 165 proposals from which we selected 80 papers or Show & Tell presentations plus 20 posters. Although the original purpose was to see to what extent ICT in language learning could be designed, developed and integrated differently from one learning situation to another, it appeared that only one situation could be clearly isolated, namely distance learning, thanks to the development of Internet. Eleven presentations were concerned with this learning situation. The rest were organised into sessions whose topics reflect the main current issues in CALL: autonomous learning, learner production and modelling, teacher training and production, language processing (with specific subtopics on dictionaries and vocabulary) and language corpora, text and writing. There were also two sessions, a keynote and a full-day seminar during the pre-conference dedicated to the second theme of the conference, 'Language testing'.

The detailed conference programme is still accessible (EUROCALL'99 1999) and the reader may find detailed reports in various languages: (Andersen, 1999; Desmarais *et al.*, 1999; Pohlmann, 1999; Weijdema, 1999).

Since there were two working languages at EUROCALL'99 (a quarter of the presentations in French and the rest in English, pre-conference events and keynotes being also given either in French or in English), the initiators, EUROCALL and ALSIC decided to publish selected papers written in French in ALSIC (to appear in the June 2000 issue) and in other languages in this *ReCALL* issue. Of course, *ReCALL* has already published (and will go on publishing) papers written in French as well as in other languages, but this way of dividing the publications resulting from the conference was sought as a

mean of letting two distinct communities of readers share the latest developments in CALL research and practice.

Let us now turn our attention to another feature of the conference which partly explains some characteristics of most of the papers selected in this issue. Every participant at the conference could note that besides presentations of software, discussions around software evaluation and authoring tools, the number of presentations based on online/Internet activities is becoming more prominent from one year to another. As announced by the title of EUROCALL'98, 'From Classroom Teaching to World-Wide Learning', there is a shift of interest in the CALL community. Network and communication technologies induce a reorientation in our concerns from the former 'Tutor-Tool' framework (as illustrated, for example, in Levy (1997)) to the 'Computer Mediated Communication' one (or, in other words, the 'Human-System-Human Interaction' framework as opposed to the former 'Human-System Interaction' one). The challenge within this approach is, firstly, to measure to what extent the 'Communications' coming from ICT offer good opportunities to set up 'communication' which leads to language learning, and, secondly, to improve these ICT environments so that they can become real learning environments. Indeed the remit of CALL cannot be restricted to the study of the use of already existing tools, but is also concerned with the development of new environments which will help us deal with the new characteristics of education and training as pointed out by the European Union.

The first article, written by Esch and Zähler who gave a keynote at the conference and are in charge of the Language Centre of the University of Cambridge, sets the scene. They aim at characterising the role individual learners play in turning ICTs into contributors to their language learning environments. After having recalled the importance of learners' variability in language learning they discuss to what extent ICTs can accommodate these individual differences. They then classify into five categories the process of integration of ICTs which either supports or prevents learners considering ICTs as an appropriate language learning environment. They stress the importance of socially shared knowledge and of conditions of accessibility, autonomy, reflectivity, and interactivity that can help learners integrate these new tools into their own environment. Lastly they show how these principles have been guiding the design of the new fully online Cambridge Language Centre.

With the second article, we moved from a fully connected centre which provides resources, but is not in charge of directly delivering courses, to the connected classroom. Gillespie presents a pilot study on the integration of a 'virtual classroom' environment, here FirstClass, in a traditional classroom. At this stage, the ICT environment is mainly viewed as a new way of managing the classroom. After having experimented with the software in several classrooms, the author draws out of questionnaires the new kinds of relationships it induces between learners and between learners and teachers.

In the third paper, Möllering uses another virtual classroom environment, namely WebCT, in a different learning context, that of distance learning. This new ICT environment is offered as an optional complement to more conventional delivery modes such as audiocassettes, printed materials, etc. It is also a pilot study which reports on the extent to which learners actually used the new environment, how they managed their learning with it and on difficulties encountered. The article provides interesting samples of

communication in L2 between learners and individualised feedback written by the teacher or, more precisely, the 'course convenor'.

The following paper, written by Shield, Davies and Weiniger who work on three different continents, focuses on a particular component of the virtual classroom environment, the text-based MOO, connected to World Wide Web. By contrast with chat programs MOO offers synchronous and asynchronous access, individual or collective activities. Relying on these possibilities, authors used their environment in different learning contexts: collaborative work between two classrooms, teacher training, native and non-native speakers of the target language. They approach the question of supporting socialisation, collaboration and autonomy within such an ICT environment.

The next three papers share a common topic around cultural issues, mainly related to the Hispanic world and around activities based on on-line technologies, either the World Wide Web or videoconferencing. O'Dowd argues in detail against the 'monocultural approach' in favour of the intercultural one, where cultures of the target language country and of home are taken into account and where cultural variations are not avoided. He achieved intercultural learning through an exchange project between two classrooms based on videoconferencing. In the second paper, written in Spanish, Cabot explains how she had British learners get a deeper sense of the Hispanic culture through the writing of a report after having navigated on the web. Learners' motivation also increased, but linguistic accuracy was not as good as expected. The following paper is of a different kind from all the others presented in this issue. During the conference, several participant found Ararte's presentation of the Centro Virtual Cervantes website so interesting and representative of what is happening in the Spanish speaking world that we decided to publish a review of this site. Gimeno Sanz and Navarro Laboulais, who have no affiliation with this institution, carried out the analysis for *ReCALL*.

With Vandeventer and Hamel's paper, we come back to natural language processing applied to CALL, a lively field of interest well represented at the conference, as mentioned before. After having presented at previous conferences or workshops other components of their system (all based on a common linguistic theoretical approach), here they detail the sentence generator and discuss the issue of reusing linguistic tools for CALL purposes.

We will close this conference selection as we open it, i.e. with the article of a keynote speaker. Laurier is a specialist in second language testing. He addresses an important issue still under debate related to computerised testing. Adaptive testing is quite popular in our field with such examples as the computerised version of the TOEFL. However, adaptive testing is usually not authentic, a feature seen as important in educational measurement as well as in language education. Thanks to the development of multimedia and other computing techniques, the author discusses whether it will soon be possible to design authentic computerised tests. He also presents the concept of portfolio, a way for a learner to gather part of his/her own work out of which his/her language competence could be assessed.

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