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Computer-aided language learning (Call) refers to the incorporation of web-based and software-based teaching techniques in language lessons. But just how developed is Call within the language teaching industry, and what are its advantages? AMY BAKER finds out.

Commenting on the use of computers and technology in language teaching, Clemente Sanchez of Paramo, Academia de Español in Spain, says, "Demand [for Call] from students is growing day by day, but it is [still] minor." She speaks for a number of language school representatives who feel that technology-aided teaching techniques are only slowly gaining in popularity.

Advantages of technology-based techniques

"The English Language Centre at the University of Victoria believes in innovative, multimedia-based language learning which responds to learner needs," states Christina Gambrell, Marketing Manager at the institution in Canada. At the university, computer-based technology is incorporated into classroom tuition, and used for "independent and home language study".

Gambrell believes that the key benefit of such an approach is flexibility for the student. Besides scheduled class visits to the university's computer centre, she reports that ELC students constituted one-quarter of all additional visitors to the computer centre – "approximately 1,650 students in our last monthly survey". The ELC has developed a series of CD-Roms and it also participates in a multi-university consortium providing quality online language courses.

Liz Karra, Coordinator of the Canadian English Language Institute at Grant MacEwan College in Canada, says that another advantage of Call is more anonymity. "Students feel safer experimenting [during a Call exercise]," she says.

Luanne McCallum, at Interlink School of Languages in South Africa, says, "We are a small school which offers a lot of personalised teaching, so there has been no real need for Call. However, as we grow, the need definitely becomes more obvious. Demand is not that strong, however, generally we find Swiss students to be the ones expecting [it]."

Aside from Swiss students, other schools point to Asian students as those who expect tuition incorporating technology or the Internet. "Koreans are always at the forefront of wanting or expecting new [techniques]," says John Langdon, Principal of Dominion English Schools in New Zealand.

Call is a broad term that explains the use of computers in the language learning process: language learning software, for example, tests students' writing, reading, listening and often, speaking ability, through exercises and puzzles. Using such software, says Fiona

Wilkinson at Bell Language Schools, "offers choice to our students because [computers] empower the students to shape their own learning". More recently, some schools have been incorporating the Internet into the learning process. Mark Warschauer at the University of California's Department of Education in Irvine is Editor of *Language Learning & Technology*. He explains, "Much current attention is going to the use of the Internet. [When] effectively used in teaching, it allows students to engage in meaningful interaction with other speakers

Mexico. But the latest development in this sector is to incorporate the Internet and software into teacher-designed lessons. "For our general English courses, a teacher will take a class into the multimedia room at least once a week and either use the Internet, a CD-Rom title or Bell's own software," reports Wilkinson. "A typical web lesson may be divided into pre-Internet activities, the Internet tasks and follow-up activities."

Warschauer points out that using computers provides students with modern means of

Peter Cervieri at US-based Distance Learning International agrees. "The online experience can break learner inhibitions," he says. "As an example, shy Asian students, who barely speak in class, often end up being very vocal and outspoken online, particularly in chat rooms and discussion forums."

Cervieri adds that technology in general has the feature of "bringing the learning to the learner", often in engaging and fun ways that a teacher could not. The advent of graphics, sound files, banks of exercises and immediate feedback all add to this. DLI's most recent technological advances include tracking features to monitor a student's progress, voice message boards, interactive courses acclaimed by the Columbia University Teachers' College and an online magazine.



or learners of a language around the world; to access a wide array of authentic materials in foreign languages related to their own interests, and even to produce and publish their own multimedia projects to share with others."

Many schools have self-access centres which allow students to use computers after lessons. "We have 47 computers equipped with high quality linguistic software, the Internet and email access," reports Luis Tamayo of Instituto Mexico Americano de Cultura in

At Bell Language Schools, Fiona Wilkinson explains, "We are experimenting with email exchange projects and finding 'key' pals. [We use] the Bell chat room as a real-time writing tool [and] post up opinions on to Bell discussion forums."

Mark Warschauer, Editor of Language Learning & Technology, points out that using the Internet, under the supervision of a teacher, is very relevant for a student. "Students can immediately put their language skills to use in practical and motivating ways." Niki McCartney, Principal of Hawthorn English Language Centre in New Zealand, adds that students can work at their own pace and familiarise themselves with keyboarding skills.

Damien C. Roy, of Bishop's University in Canada, points out that new teachers use computers in their training, "and they have grown up with the computer being omnipresent in their life". Therefore, Call is likely to become increasingly integral and relevant to the language learning and teaching process.

interaction, while Wilkinson adds, "Not offering [Call] could potentially deter some students, as their expectations are raised by what is offered in their own schools at home."

An important point, all schools agree, is that Call should be just one aspect of the language learning process. Peter Cervieri, at Distance Learning International (DLI) in the USA, says "blended learning" is an increasing feature of the market. "The computer will never replace the classroom teacher, so we are working to enhance the overall learning experience for any type of student," he says. DLI has developed "online schools" for a number of institutions, including Geos New York and Embassy CES.

Wilkinson says that Bell's agents, led by the expectation of clients, now believe computers are essential to class-based learning. "The future of learning and the future of computers are likely to go hand-in-hand."