

CALL in China

Wang Wei and Gary Motteram show how China has been slow to adopt but fast to follow up what is now seen as a possible language-learning solution.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) statistics (April 2005), over 20 million students were enrolled in 2,236 institutions of higher learning in China in 2004. At all the levels of doctorate, MA, BA and college diploma programmes, a foreign language (in most cases, English) is a compulsory course. Apart from a small proportion of English-major programmes, most of the English courses have long been deemed inefficient and ineffective as the students are reported to have finished their English courses as good test-takers, but poor communicators. CALL is increasingly being seen as one way of improving this situation.

CALL denotes 'the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning' (Levy 1997: 1). The CALL literature since the 1960s has recorded an interesting parallel between the emerging theories of language learning and the constant technological and pedagogical innovations in computer assisted language learning. China, however, has not always been with the tide.

While Europe and America saw a phenomenal spread and expansion of the computer and the Internet in the 1990s, China's computer era had only just arrived. But the same decade witnessed the astounding development and growth in both IT and educational technology arenas in China.

An IBM estimate in 1997 of the total number of personal computers in China was more than 5 million. The 1st China Internet Information Centre (CNNIC) report announced that, by October 1997, there were *0.299 million* online computers in China, of which the majority (*0.25 million*) were connected to the Internet by a dialup connection through the telephone line. The 7th CNNIC report in July 2000 announced 6.5 million online computers in China. By July 2005, the 16th

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CNNIC report claimed *45.6 million* online computers in China, among which *half* are using broadband connection to the Internet (6.7 million through DDL, 18.2 million through various other means of connection such as the xDSL or cable modem, and 20.7 million through dialup). There have been government-supported initiatives to create and improve the infrastructure and access of information communication technology in schools and universities nationwide.

From the year 1994–1999, a Sino-British distance teacher training project, jointly administered by the Beijing Foreign Studies University of China and the British Council, developed a 15-volume self-study package as a response to

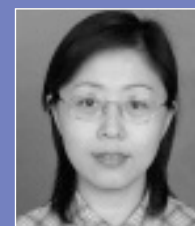
the government-stipulated requirement to upgrade the academic credentials of China's middle school English teachers up to the BA level. The study materials intend to cater to their needs for both proficiency development and professional advancement, featuring multimedia-supported ELT and pedagogical contents. This package was introduced into an early round of the MOE pilot project in distance education, with a BA non-degree course in TEFL disseminated by the China Central Radio & TV University (CCRTVU), China's key institution for distance and open education. The same package has now been converted into online learning packages, strengthened with abundant online materials for study and self-assessment as a support for the online self-study.

In 1999, the State Education Commission of China (SEdC) nominated four key universities to introduce distance education programs. It was the beginning of a series of pilot reforms to introduce distance education into China's conventional institutions of higher learning. There are now altogether 67 such universities around China, plus one distance learning institution (the CCRTVU). Among them there are three language institutes which specialise in offering online foreign language courses for Chinese students and an online Chinese course for foreigner learners.

Another MOE plan, announced in 2002 by Wu Qidi, a Vice-Minister of Education of China, was to fund the research and development of 1500 quality courses, which are to be accredited by the MOE between the year of 2003 and 2007 as 'National Top-Quality Courses' and are to be made available online for free. The purpose is the sharing of quality resources to facilitate educational improvement.

At the beginning of 2004, the MOE initiated the first round of a nationwide research-oriented reform in English language teaching in China by selecting four multimedia web-based English course packages published by four academic presses in China to be piloted in 180 colleges and universities for one academic year in 118 colleges and universities in their so-called 'college-English' course. These 118 institutions are required to implement computer-assisted multimedia-supported online courses into their 'College English' curriculum, to carry out empirical studies, and to publish their findings in academic journals.

As a result of this series of top-down initiatives, the last decade has also seen an increasing interest among China's educational critics, researchers, and practitioners in the area of technology and education. For example, a subject keyword search with '*daxue yingyu*' + '*wangluo*' + '*duomeiti*' 'college English + web + multimedia' in all journals in the Chinese academic journals (CNKI) database published between 1995 and 2003 resulted in 114 hits, while the same search in the years 2003–2005 results in 126 hits. A new round of pilot studies is underway in the current academic



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CALL in China is a growing phenomenon and, with the large number of learners of English throughout the education system, it seemed timely to run a joint conference to give a wider audience to the fascinating work that is being undertaken in the world's largest educational system. The conference is being sponsored and organized by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press of Beijing Foreign Studies University (the top university for languages in China) and the Learning Technologies SIG. You can get more information about the conference from the website at <http://call2006.fltrp.com>.

year. Some of the topics that are being explored and written about are as follows.

Skills development and skills integration

Specific attention has been devoted to the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These deal with two major issues: materials for skills development and methods for skill improvement.

Teacher roles and learner roles in CALL environments

There is a growing awareness in the literature of changing roles of teachers and learners. Course materials that explicitly address the issue may be found in the TEFL training package mentioned earlier. Academic articles, most of which reflect on the pilot distance learning and online learning programmes, have been published only recently. Increasing interest has been shown in the constructivist philosophy and, with such a line of thought, the practice of collaborative learning, project-based learning, electronic portfolios and formative assessment.

CALL technologies

Early work on the technology front was mostly carried out by educational technologists who work in the technology sectors in schools and universities. Such work tended to describe the procedures and underlying rationale to explain the potential of the new media. But they failed to have any major impact simply because the classroom teachers did not

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have access either to the computer or to the software. A computer lab seems always a school treasure; even nowadays, these softly humming machines still bring awe simply because they cost money. Some of the early serious papers were written about CAI courseware and the use of email. More recently, seminal work has been done in the area of online courseware development, learner corpora creation and a web-based CALL environment.

IT literacy and training

Most of the computer literacy articles and studies have been published since 2000 and explicitly address the need for every teacher and student to develop computer literacy and skills to enhance their academic practice. Some specific discussions give guidance to the teacher, such as how to use PowerPoint for classroom instruction and Windows NetMeeting for online communication, how to support oral communication using LANs, and how to create and maintain (virtual) language labs.

Learning support and management systems in CALL and online education

With the development of online CALL, the notion of learning systems has become a major concern. Since 2001, a couple of articles explicitly address the importance of systemic thinking in the exercises of online TEFL for the College English reform.

In the evolving world of CALL, along with the constant research and development of technology, studies in CALL in China, like in the west, draw upon multidisciplinary sources for their rationale and methodology. Academics turn to related disciplines for a sound rationale of CALL practice; these disciplines, as shown in the papers written, include mainly philosophy, psycholinguistics, cognitive science, computer science, second language acquisition and education. New online learning EFL course packages claimed a constructivist standing, but really succeed at best in providing traditional content for EFL. But there is a step forward in both understanding and practice of the nature and challenges of online CALL for a Chinese audience. Much thought has been put into the new ways to improve TEFL pedagogy so that students learn better.

The discussion above is based on the academic papers published in China in the Chinese language and which are included in the CNKI database. There are other sources of academic articles about the Chinese context, which have not yet been included in the CNKI database. In an editorial of the *Computer Assisted Language Learning Journal*, Jozef Colpaert wrote in 2002 (p. 437):

Recently, Frank Borchardt informed me about the journal *Teaching English in China*, published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing. The articles are well written and refer very accurately to available literature, while they are not often referred to in European and American CALL literature.

There are also academic conventions which attract an international audience. We have seen, in recent years, the China CALL Convention (2000, Guangzhou), the Sino-British Symposium on CALL for Primary and Middle Schools (2001, Guangzhou), the National CALL Symposium (2003, Beijing) the 4th International Conference in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (Beijing 2005), International Symposium on Online English Education in China (2005, Beijing), the 2nd PacCALL Conference (2005, Kunming).

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Reference

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