

# Teachers' Changing Role in Computer Assisted Language Learning in Higher Education in China

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**Abstract**—As the information age commenced in the late 20th century, computer assisted language learning (CALL) systems have been developed to provide foreign language teaching with a more advanced medium. With CALL growing worldwide, English language teaching (ELT) in China starts to meet the challenge. Analyzing the impact brought to ELT in China by the development of modern science and technology, the study tries to explore how students and teachers view their CALL learning/teaching experience and find out what kind of roles language teachers should play in the teaching process. The subjects are mainly from Northwestern Polytechnic University. Data for the study were collected over a four-month period, consisting of quantitative information obtained from questionnaire surveys of network use among learners and teachers and qualitative information gathered from a series of interviews with teachers and others concerned. With the combination of theoretical and empirical studies, the paper reveals no avoidance of the changes of English language teachers' roles and puts forward ways to educate and help teachers to realize these necessary changes.

**Index Terms**—Computer assisted language learning, English language teaching, higher education, teachers' role.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A profound reform is taking place while the society enters the 21st century when 'e-' becomes the vogue symbol and mark of the time. The emergence of a series of new terms and concepts such as e-mail, e-home, e-business and e-service is constantly reminding people that the Internet has become a world-wide platform for people to carry out various activities. In the area of educational research and application, terms like e-Education and online Education are no longer new, which implies that a new reform is taking place in the sector of education. E-learning has become the new frontier in education. Arnold views that as the use of computer assisted language learning (CALL) grows worldwide, English language teaching (ELT) in China starts to meet the challenge [1]. On Jan.2, 2004, the Ministry of Education issued a new "Course Requirements for College English Teaching" in which it is stated that the new teaching model should be based on modern information technology, especially the network so as to make ELT develop in a way of personalized and active learning without restriction of time and places [2].

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is an

approach to language teaching and learning in which computer technology is used as an aid to the presentation, reinforcement and assessment of material to be learned, usually including a substantial interactive element [3]. Early CALL favored an approach that drew heavily on practices associated with programmed instruction [4]. This was reflected in the term Computer Assisted Language Instruction (CALI), which originated in the USA and was in common use until the early 1980s, when CALL became the dominant term [5]. Throughout the 1980s CALL widened its scope, embracing the communicative approach and a range of new technologies, especially multimedia and communications technology.

In a provocative article, Basanta states that in recent years two parallel processes have been at work, with the role of the learner being steadily upgraded, and that of the teacher moving in the opposite direction [6]. This can be seen from the fact that while books and articles concerned with learner are in abundance, there is still little research on what the teacher brings to the process of second language education. This "learner-centeredness" movement does not deny the importance of the teacher, nor imply that there is no role for the teacher in a learner-centered classroom, quite the contrary, it led to a reexamination of traditional teacher roles, for even so-called innovative methods still require teachers to bring into full play their particular roles in the classroom in order to facilitate the learning processes. Richards and Nunan view that for language teachers there is a new, more evolved role which can be, in some ways more challenging, also more exciting and fulfilling [7]. There are also clear signs today that the importance of the teachers' role in the language learning processes has not diminished, which can be seen in some of the publications on teacher development and the emphasis in current second language acquisition studies on qualitative research in which teachers are active participants or initiators [8].

With limited researches in the role played by language teachers in computer assisted English language teaching/learning in higher education in China, this study tries to rethink and redefine the teacher's role in a special classroom setting: computer-assisted language learning.

## II. MODERN ELT AND DEVELOPMENT OF CALL IN CHINA

As a window for Chinese to see the world as well as the access to western modern scientific and technological advances, English is not only the language for us to communicate with English native speakers, but also with Koreans, Japanese and other Asians. The wide spread of

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English over the last 40 years is remarkable in the history of China.

*A. Modern ELT in China*

A great deal of attention has been paid to English teaching and learning since the beginning of the reform of Chinese economy in 1978. English has long been a compulsory course in secondary schools as well as in colleges and universities with millions of English learners and over 500,000 English teachers. The Ministry of Education issued guidelines for textbook makers, requesting that English textbooks should include materials on the Western culture, listening and speaking practice as well. The most prominent in reforming the English testing system in China is that English became part of the College Entrance Examinations.

However, there are some disadvantages of ELT education in China. The first is a lack of qualified foreign language teachers most of whom have no experience of living in western countries. On the other hand, effective English teachers should have abundant cross-cultural awareness. It is often the case that quite a number of English teachers in China could hardly meet their students' high expectation. As a result, the teacher development program has become the "bottle-neck" issue in our current ELT. Worse still, the methodology has become a big problem. Teachers as well as students typically adopt the Grammar-Translation method to teach and learn English, which focuses on English grammar and vocabulary, on linguistic phenomena rather than on reading the content itself, let alone on the practice of listening and speaking.

The traditional ELT model in China can be summarized as: "teacher+student+textbooks+chalks (or projector or tape recorder)", which has been in operation for decades throughout China and is still being used in many areas of the country [9]. In a word, the traditional ELT model in China is successful in some aspects, yet its limitations make it hard to meet the needs of the rapid developing ELT in China at the current time. Therefore, reform is irreversible trend.

*B. Current situation of CALL in China*

As the Information Age commenced in the late 20th century, CALL systems have been developed to provide foreign language teaching with a more advanced medium. CALL is a new thing in China, yet it is a fast developing one.

Computers find a very important usage in our language classes by providing a large amount of facilities and application opportunities. And all this happened as a result of cooperation of language instructors, computer programmers, curriculum designers and skillful graphic designers.

CALL model differently can be summarized as "teacher+student+computer (network)+programs". There are different applications of such a model, taking Fudan University for example, which adopts the way of "multimedia aids teaching+self-learning supplementary textbooks+classroom teaching" for ELT [10]. Besides, it also emphasizes student-centered learning and regards learners as the main body of knowledge acquisition and information processing as well as the active constructor of knowledge meanings [11]. There appeared some "learning supplementary" programs under this theory, such as the CD

of "College English---Intensive Reading and Listening Comprehension" made by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, etc..

However, as a newly emerging thing, there are some problems in the CALL model in China, as shown in the following respects: short of funds; lack of personnel who are good at both ELT and computer; lack of teacher-student interaction and individual learning in CALL due to the large class size there.

III. AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

The study is to explore how students and teachers view their CALL learning/teaching experience with a view to deciding whether CALL may have a valid place in language teaching and find out what kind of roles language teachers should play in the teaching process.

*A. Method*

This study is about sample lessons for a multi-media language lab through a courseware that is specifically designed for English language listening and speaking teaching. The subjects are mainly from Northwestern Polytechnic University. Data for the study were collected over a four-month period, consisting of quantitative information obtained from questionnaire surveys of network use amongst learners and teachers and qualitative information gathered from a series of interviews with teachers and others concerned. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 250 students who had already learned listening and speaking skills through network. The subjects were asked to fill in questionnaires in order to detect a range of learners' attitudes toward the use of CALL. All designed questions focused on the investigation of students' general confidence about computers, then their feelings about the media and their use of them. There was also an additional survey of the teachers' comments on using CALL for teaching listening and speaking skills regardless of whether they have the CALL teaching experience. Its focus was on learning objectives, learning skills and strategies as well as the teachers' attitude and their adjustment in teaching method and style. Following these two-week surveys were oral interviews

*B. Findings*

TABLE I: SOME OF THE RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY

Items	Students' views	Teachers' views
Former experience of CALL	45%	89%
Positive views towards multimedia use in ELT	100%	90%
Lack of confidence in computer use	40%	55%
Possession of proper computer skills	30%	20%
Technical problems encountered during the lesson	70%	65%
Satisfaction of the current course	52%	60%
Progress reported at the end of the course	80%	61%
Positive views of teachers' role in class	91%	100%

As shown in TABLE I, surveys and interviews of EFL teachers and learners regarding technology in their work have yielded a number of significant findings in the following areas: learners and teachers' expectations towards

multimedia tools; computer skills and technical problems; learners and teachers' evaluation of CALL in teaching listening skills; teachers' role and students' progress.

*1) Learners and teachers' expectations are towards multimedia tools*

All the 250 students and 27 out of 30 teachers in the survey expected multimedia to be the most exciting and effective of teaching tools, believing that multimedia make the acquisition process easier, quicker and more interesting. These expectations may have originated from the fact that we are now living in an age of visual effects where most people prefer and respond more favorably to visual stimuli than to sound only.

*2) Computer skill and technical problems*

The study revealed surprisingly widespread unfamiliarity with computers among both learners and teachers. About forty percent of students did not feel confident in working with computers and needed technical assistance during the lesson. The reason they claimed was that they received too little computer training before their course. One third of these students admitted that they often played games during class, the others did so sometimes since they could hardly resist the temptation of available games or music shows when some of the lessons, as they described, were long, boring and irrelevant. Some students expected computers to be perfect tools; therefore, they were even more frustrated than usual when they were disappointed. The restrictions also appeared on the side of the teachers. Like the students, the teachers all claimed that they needed to be trained much more in computer skills in order to deal with technical problems. Only twenty percent of those felt confident in operating equipment and had ability to tackle some common problems.

*3) Learners and teachers' evaluation*

209 out of the 250 student questionnaire respondents were satisfied with their learning in CALL and claimed that they loved working with computers and microphones. The others said that their learning in CALL did not come up to their expectations, and judged the work in CALL as time-consuming. The survey showed that up to eleven percent of the teachers had never taught in CALL although they were eager to for two different reasons. Half of them were curious and wanted to challenge themselves with a new task while the other half saw the value of CALL over audio tools they were using. On the other hand, those who already worked in CALL did not seem to be confident in giving proper instructions, designing activities and solving problems occurring during the lessons. A majority of teachers admitted that they could hardly manage the class and monitor student's jobs.

*4) Teacher's role and learner's progress*

A CALL class is more teacher-fronted than a student-centered as the teacher plays a crucial role in the class. Almost every teacher exploited such functions of the course teaching as to replay sequences of recording, use pause/still frame, interrupt sound to check comprehension, cut off sound to focus on discussion, replace soundtrack with own narration or ask students to narrate, select certain sequences for intensive listening, pass over others, and to assign certain sequences for out of class exercises. However, quite a large

number of teachers did not know how to operate the equipment to group or to pair students; therefore, they could not create follow-up activities. Thus, preparation of role plays or discussions was difficult. The majority of teachers said that class management is the most challenging task as they could hardly check whether students were working or playing games. Nevertheless, surveys show that most of the students and teachers express their positive feeling of the teachers' role in class.

*5) Learner's progress*

Learner assessment included self-evaluations of the students, the assessment of teachers and students' grades at the final exam. Twenty percent of student respondents claimed that they were not motivated and made little progress in listening comprehension and proficiency. Eighty percent felt that they made little and slow progress, which was out of their expectations. Teachers also said that their students seemed to gain no remarkable advances in listening. At final exams, around thirty percent of the students got higher grades than before. The rest got the same or even lower marks. This result is not difficult to explain. Apart from inadequate technical ability, a majority of students made little improvement because of their learning habits.

To accomplish the online education, teachers will need substantial support to shift from traditional teaching to roles emphasizing: facilitation; in-depth assessment of student understanding; coordination of multiple sources of learning support. The constant and fast change of information and communication technology requires a continuous process of development of competencies and that CALL teachers should have and demands lifelong professional preparation and proper pedagogical training. Without training and CALL experience, teachers will continue to duplicate their practices onto the Internet and will not profit adequately from the new media. It is important to mention a teacher who wants to work online also needs to understand the nature and philosophy of distance education. In order to support teachers in changing roles, we have to be concerned with two overall issues. First, the goals for and practice of teaching is changing, and we must understand more about these changes in classrooms, and in contexts of professional development. Second, these changes can be supported by designing and incorporating technologies to advantage.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Many nations are well aware of the importance of optimizing the educational structure and cultivating qualified personnel. Since China has the features of large population, abundant land and complicated social members, e-learning is undoubtedly one of the best ways to popularize education at present and of the future. As computer has become indispensable in our education, there is no reason that language teachers should not get well prepared to meet its challenge. Undoubtedly, ELT in China is different from that in other countries such as the Great Britain, the United States, or even Singapore, Japan, etc.. However, facing the new and fast-developing technology, the computer science, all we can do are the same — to be the survival of the fittest.

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