

Communicative Language Teaching in a Multimedia Language Lab

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1.0. Introduction

Due to the impact and influence of information technology on society and education, computer-assisted language learning is becoming the trend in foreign language teaching. Interactive computer network allows students to test the result of learning without the risk of being punished for any mistake. Learning does not have to be a pressure. Computer-assisted language learning can reduce the anxiety of students and turns out to be a positive side of learning (Gates, 1997).

The study is the extension of Huang (1997). As a result, the aim of this study tends to explore how students adjust themselves in learning English with the aid of multimedia computers and the interaction between students and multimedia computers. The literature of past research in the Communicative Language Teaching Approach and computer-assisted language learning usually look into the topics in their own domain. The research combining the two fields is not common so far, which makes this study important.

This study would like to address three questions. First, what are the similarities and differences of language teaching and learning between a traditional classroom and a multimedia language lab under the communicative framework? Second, are there any changes in the roles of teachers and students when they are in a different teaching environment from traditional classroom? Third, what are the implications of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT approach hereafter) in a multimedia computer language lab in teaching?

2.0. Review of Literature

Many researchers have helped develop the theory and practice the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (Brown, 1987; Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Hymes, 1972; Nattinger, 1984; Nunan, 1987 & 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Rossner, 1988; Savignon, 1983; White, 1989; Yalden, 1983). The underlying theory of the CLT approach is the communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Students do not simply learn the linguistic structures and grammar rules. They have to learn how to use the language properly. Littlewood (1981) described the CLT approach that one of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pay systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language. In reaction to the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods, the CLT approach emphasizes the communicative activities that involve the real use of language in daily life situation.

To combine the CLT approach with a framework of computer-assisted language learning, computer simulation seems to be the best strategy to fit both. Huang (1997) categorized computer simulations into two types: instruction-oriented and fun-oriented. Their categorization depends on their primary purpose, the nature of computer-human interaction, and the amount of control (see table below).

	Primary purpose	Computer-human interaction	User control
Instruction-oriented	Teaching & learning	Unbalanced	Limited
Fun-oriented	Motivational & entertaining	Balanced	Multiple

The primary purpose is remarkably significant as it will determine the nature of the computer simulations. The instruction-oriented

computer simulation aims at teaching or helping people learn. Consequently, the primary purpose of this type of computer simulation will be giving instructions and placing the responsibility of learning on the users for most of the time and constantly monitoring them to see whether they have successfully achieved the goal. Moreover, the nature of computer-human interaction is not balanced. Users receive instructions passively, then respond, and wait further instructions. The computer becomes dominant in the interaction. Subsequently, the user's choice during the interaction is rather limited. Users do not have much choice since all available choices are predetermined. The outcome of the user's move becomes predictable. The user's limited control over the computer is partly due to the fact that users in an instruction-oriented simulation are expected to accomplish a pre-set goal in learning. The simulation guides users in a certain direction. Therefore, the user's choices are restricted by simulation's primary purpose.

Take the famous Living Books series (Broderbund) for example. Users can click on a paragraph and the text will be read out loud. When users click on any objects in the background, the object will move accompanied by sound effects. Users can continue clicking as often as they like, but the one-click-one-move interaction remains the same.

On the contrary, the primary purpose of fun-oriented simulations is to be both motivational and entertaining. Instruction in a particular subject is not the primary concern in fun-oriented simulations. This type of computer simulation tends to motivate users to get interested in the simulation itself. Entertainment is the goal. As a result, both user and computer share equal opportunities to receive instructions from and respond to each other. Furthermore, the user has multiple choice for taking control. Fewer restrictions are imposed. The user's move could lead to another multiplicity of choices and the prompting of an unexpected response from the computer.

However, the two categories of computer simulations are not mutually exclusive of each other. Rather, they would be better regarded as the two ends of a continuum. All computer simulation activities fall somewhere in between. In other words, it is very possible that a computer simulation possesses both instruction-oriented and fun-oriented features.

3.0.Methodology

Subjects

The present study was conducted in the spring semester of 1998. Subjects were 45 second-year students in the five-year program of the Department of Foreign Languages at Fooyin Institute of Technology, Taiwan. The study took place in the setting of the students "Oral Practice" course. The aim of the course in the second semester was to further expand students' English oral skills to a more composition-like style. The teacher and students met for one 2 hour session every week.

All of the students graduated from junior high school. They had completed 4 years of English study (3 years in junior high school, one year at Fooyin). Also, students were familiar with the basic operation of computers such as saving and retrieving files because they took a required computer introductory course at the first year and meanwhile were taking a required word processing course.

Setting

The instructor did not instruct and guide the English conversation practice in a classroom merely equipped with only desks, chairs, and a large blackboard. Instead, the course was carried out in a multimedia computer language lab (multimedia lab hereafter). There are fifty six Pentium class desktops in the lab. They are all networked. Two computers are set for instructor use only.

The multimedia lab shares some features with the traditional audio-lingual language lab. The teacher can broadcast the teaching materials by playing audio tapes, video-tapes, or CDs. Students practice with each other in pairs by themselves. The instructor assigns a pair of students as the model group.

The multimedia lab has some features that traditional language lab cannot compete. First, a traditional language lab does not have the function of video on demand. Students can choose an English teaching program they are interested in and learn on their pace of learning. The English learning program will just serve the student's desired goal of learning. In one sense, students easily get the individual attention from the computer. Second, the function of a multimedia lab is multiple. It can not only assume the role of a traditional language lab, but also offer teachers more powerful teaching tools with the aid of modern computer technology.

Design

The design of this study basically follows Huang (1997). The subjects were paired in groups. Students were assigned a topic for every meeting in the class. First, students began to play a computer simulation software, SimTown, and designed a simulated town on the computer. Next, they had to work on the assignment based on the assigned topic and the created city.

To be more specific, each session consisted of five stages. First, the teacher oriented students to the basic operation of computers again. Then, the teacher needed to present the simulation software. Second, after students learned how to play SimTown, they must build their own simulation town. Students were required to build the town in collaboration with the partner. They played the role of mayor of the simulated town. At this stage, students merely enjoyed the fun of playing. What they did not know was that they were establishing their own computer simulation environment for language learning. They were allowed to build the city in whichever way they desired. Third, after students finished building their city, the city itself then became the simulation world as students' learning materials. Students were required to practice an assigned topic. Fourth, students presented their simulated town to the class based on the assigned topic. The presentation was oral and in English. The student presentations could be given either individually or in groups. This presentation stage includes two parts: presentation and interaction. In addition to the presentation itself, the other class members might ask questions. It usually took place in a multimedia lab because each group simulation town would be broadcast to every student monitor screen.

Before leaving this section, it stands to reason that a short introduction of the computer simulation software employed in this study is necessary. SimTown is a computer simulation program created by Maxis/Electronic Arts. It is designed for children at the age of 3 to 10. As a result, it happens to be very suitable for EFL students at the intermediate level for the following reasons. First, the layout and graphic design are very appealing to students. They will not easily feel bored and keep being interested in the software. Second, the vocabulary in the software is easy to understand. Since the software is about a town, it provides several name list of trees, houses, buildings and the like. Students will increase their vocabulary by playing the software. Third, unlike SimCity, SimTown's counterpart for adults, every creature in this software has its name and personal information such as favorite food and sports. The player can even create his own character and track the character location in the town. It adds more realism to the software.

The challenge of this simulation is that the player must build a town from scratch and then manage it. The town will become a ghost town if it is poorly managed. The computer simulation computes every decision the player makes. The computer simulation will respond to every move the player makes.

Data Collection

The data was obtained through teacher classroom observation and a group interview of five randomly selected students. The purpose of the interview session tended to further understand the student's attitudes toward the CLT approach and the multimedia lab. The students, including three male students and two female students, were randomly selected. The interview was conducted in Chinese at the end of the 1998 spring semester. The interview session lasted about twenty minutes in a question and answer manner and the contents of the interview were noted down. Before the group interview, the five students were briefed about the nature of the interview.

4.0. Discussion

What are the similarities and differences of language teaching and learning between a traditional classroom and a multimedia language lab under the communicative framework?

The study presents two types of communication in the multimedia lab from the perspective of the CLT teaching. First, the CLT teaching in the multimedia lab presents a large impact on the student-teacher communication. The student-teacher communication seemed to be blocked to some extent by the layout of the multimedia lab. Physically, the multimedia lab is larger than the traditional classroom. The physical distance enlarged the psychological distance. It has the tendency that the two-way communication between the teacher and the students turned to be the one-way teacher to student communication.

Second, the student-computer communication is relatively new to students. For most of the students, it was the first time for them to take so much time "talking" to a computer. Here we need to clarify the concept of communication with a computer. As mentioned above, SimTown is an interactive software. By interaction, we mean that the computer software will respond to students' move and every decision will lead to different ends. The computer software and students do not communicate with each other by "words." Instead, students need to learn another communication system. The computers communicate by means of graphic presentation, sound

effect, and animated characters. Students have to learn how to communicate with the computer so that they know what move they should make next.

Next, the layouts of the traditional classroom and the multimedia lab look similar. The seats and computers are all arranged in a matrix. One important difference is that the teacher can easily reach students by walking in the aisle between two columns of seats and initiate the communication. Students can also easily rearrange the seats for the communicative activities in the classroom. It does not happen that way in a multimedia lab. All computers are fixed on the floor in the same matrix as the seat arrangement in a traditional classroom. All of sudden the teacher has the difficulty reaching students. A multimedia lab is far larger than a traditional classroom. Thus, the teacher needs to talk to students through the broadcasting system. The "intimacy" between the student and the teacher is gone. All students can see is a teacher hiding behind the control console.

Also, the communicative activities are different. In a traditional classroom, the teacher provides the topic-specific situation for students to make use of language as much as they can. Since the traditional classroom is far from any similarities to the real life situation, the teacher has to tell students to use their imagination and place themselves in that situation. Nevertheless, the multimedia lab offers the opportunity for students to visualize the situation. The computer software creates a virtual world that is very similar to the real world. It is a world that you can see.

Are there any changes in the roles of teachers and students when they are in a different teaching environment from traditional classroom?

The role of teachers and students apparently change. The teacher assumes the role of coach or director. He or she orchestrates the flow of communication for the whole class. However, the teacher must realize that to some extent a teacher has been shared with the computer. In this study, the computer software is not designed for teaching. Therefore, the intervention of computer in a teacher's teaching is not very obvious yet. In case that a learning-oriented computer software is used in a multimedia lab, teachers have to be aware that students no longer depend on the only source of knowledge. The computer software will "teach" students the knowledge that teachers are supposed to teach. As a result, a teacher must transform his role from a coach or a director under the communicative framework to a coordinator. The teacher coordinates the flow of communication between the teacher and the student as well as between the student and the computer.

On the other hand, students should elevate their learning motivation and independence on learning. Students' higher motivation is reflected by the interest of participation. When the communicative task requires the student and his partner to complete the town building task on the computer, the negotiation is initiated. Although they might not necessarily speak English when they negotiate about the town building, some students felt the need to communicate in English. Also, they felt that they could set the pace of learning. They did not have to finish the town building in one hour. Rather, they would discuss with the partner and built the town according to their pace of learning.

What are the implications of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach in a multimedia computer language lab in teaching?

First, the choice of appropriate computer software that fits into the setting of a multimedia lab is one of the keys to success. As discussed above, the setting of a multimedia lab is different from a traditional classroom. Computer software is not used at all in a traditional classroom. Textbooks and audio-tapes are the main teaching sources. They are still very helpful teaching tools in a multimedia lab. However, the medium of teaching ought to go along with the computers. The other dimension that should be taken into consideration is that the teaching tool is also different in a multimedia lab. Chalks and blackboard are obsolete. The computer is the most appropriate teaching tool in a multimedia lab. Accordingly, using computer software in a multimedia lab should be fun and interactive.

Second, orientation is import. The problems come from two aspects. One is the computer software itself. One extra job that students have to do is to learn how to manipulate the computer software. For the first few weeks, students have to become familiar with the manipulation of the computer software so that they can begin to make use of the software. Teachers should be aware of the possible frustration resulting from the unfamiliarity of computer software. The student's difficulty in the manipulation of the software usually undermine the students' interest in the class. The computer software is completely new to students. Consequently, negative interactions between students and the computer proved to be very frustrating for most students. Alexis & Trollop warns (1985) that

"less threat and anxiety were as an advantage of simulations, but the opposite can also be true, because simulations call for

intensive interaction among participants, and the results of decisions and suggestions a student may make are immediately apparent to participants. Simulations can be more threatening and more anxiety provoking than traditional lecture methods." (p.185)

They must experiment playing with it. However, the teacher assistance will help them smooth out the difficulty and they will be very glad to engage in all communicative activities based on the computer software.

The other is the technical problems in the management of the multimedia lab. For most of teachers, it demonstrates a major challenge. In a multimedia lab, the management demands not only the fundamental knowledge of computer, but also the advanced the knowledge of computer, which is almost impossible for the majority of English teachers. In other words, you need to be familiar with the computer software you are using in the class, answer students' technical questions, and diagnose the temporary shut-down of computer. In comparison with the work in a traditional classroom, managing a conversation class under the communicative framework in a multimedia lab is relatively demanding.

5.0. Limitations and Implication

In conclusion, on the basis of the previous discussion, this study does not present enough evidence to show that the communicative language teaching method is more effective than it is in the traditional classroom. However, this study would like to suggest some directions for teachers' reference.

First, teachers should prepare themselves for the use of modern computer technology. Foreign language training will not always take place in a traditional classroom. With the help of a setting such as a multimedia lab, foreign language training will be more efficient. Teachers should have the clear idea of how a traditional classroom is different from a multimedia lab. To serve that purpose well, this study summarizes the previous discussion as below.

	Traditional Classroom	Multimedia Lab
Layout	Matrix	Matrix
Teaching tools	Chalk, blackboard, audio tapes	Local computer network, video on demand.
Teaching materials	Textbook	Interactive computer software
Communicative activities	Imaginative role-play	Realistic computer-simulated environment
Student-teacher	Direct communication and more "intimacy"	Indirect communication and less "intimacy"
Student-computer	Not available	Interactive

Moreover, regarding the procedures of carrying out the project, orientation is the key factor in determining success with the project. Teachers must clearly state the goals and linguistic skills students are expected to attain by playing the computer simulation. Students had to keep in mind their purpose for playing the simulation. Otherwise, they would tend to indulge themselves in simply playing. Also, since SimTown is an English-version software, it is essential that teachers get students familiarized with necessary vocabulary to play the computer simulation before the group project. Moreover, SimTown is an interactive software. That is, messages regarding the city during its stages of development could pop out in English at anytime. The computer simulation has its own "advisors" who are always willing to offer their valuable suggestions to help students run a better city. Students would also encounter difficulties building their city if they could not understand the on-line interactive messages.

Although this study shows that the CLT approach is not as successful as we had expected in a setting of the multimedia lab, this study suggests that with the fast development of computer technology, foreign language teaching in a setting other than the traditional classroom is still a promising trend.

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VI, No. 2, February 2000

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