



Computers And Language Learning

Vol. 5 No. 6
Sept. 15, 1989

Published 8 times a year by the International Society for Technology in Education for computer-using ESOL teachers.

COMPUTER LABS

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The June 1989 *CALL Digest* had "The One-Computer Class" as its theme; with this issue we move to the other end of the spectrum and look at computer labs. As Geoff Jordan points out in his article, this classroom-lab dichotomy was traditionally a European-United States difference. Many viewed the lab setting with disdain, seeing it as merely a variant of the multi-station language lab with an audio-lingual approach. In that type of computer lab, students would be "programmed" into English with sequenced grammar drills and not much else.

However, just as self-access has revived interest in the language lab, so has the use of word-processing and an individualized learning approach brought broader appeal to the computer lab. Vance Stevens' research article in this issue indicates that students can learn to use a self-access lab, and do like using the computers in this type of setting to learn English. Even when all students are working on similar tasks, as in Evelyn Fella's writing lab, each student is still able to proceed at his or her own pace through the tasks. Having multiple computers means that students do not need to move in lockstep.

Dominic Berducci's article gives a sense of what is out there in existing computer labs and brings up important points to consider, such as whether the lab should be part of a teacher's teaching load, the advantages and disadvantages of networking, and some nuts and bolts hardware questions. Once again, the theme of teacher training for CALL is brought up, and with it the subject of extra pay for trained teachers. Of course, training and pay are issues in any CALL setting, not just with computer labs.

To address the basic question, however, of whether to choose a lab setting or a classroom setting for computer use in language teaching, we need to consider what each does well and what each does poorly. Then, as Jordan points out, curricular fit comes into play. In general, tasks best performed by individuals or by very small groups require the use of a multi-station lab. Most writing at the paragraph and longer level falls into that category, as do most reading tasks where individual differences in reading speed affect progress through the material.

On the other hand, the lab is not the place for tasks that require a lot of teacher direction or control. As Fella says, in a situation where the teacher is competing with the computer screen for students' attention, the teacher loses. For whole-group efforts, such as some problem-solving/speaking activities, two computers are one too many. When working on a class newsletter or another project with unified output, it is best to have all students working together on a single computer, at least at the page layout stage. It would take an extraordinary effort to train a whole class of students in the mechanics of a program like *Publish It!* or *PageMaker*. A large monitor or a liquid crystal display projector (like a PC Viewer) so that everyone can see what is on the computer screen is also essential to success with one computer in a classroom.

Another major drawback with a lab setting is the ease with which the lab can be divorced from the curriculum and become an island unto itself, with one or two teachers who specialize in computer use and the rest of the staff indifferent to it. The students who happen to wander into the lab may find something of interest, but it will mostly be up to the staff in the lab to try to come up with the software relevant to each student. If twelve people in need of assistance in deciding what to work on enter the lab simultaneously, this is a nearly impossible task. It is much easier in situations where classroom teachers can and do suggest to their students what to work on in the lab. Having a list of programs cross-referenced with the curriculum is a great help, too.

Training — of students, teachers, assistants, coordinators — is a critical area. With one computer in one classroom, one teacher can be taught to use CALL effectively, and one classroom of students will benefit. An assistant is not necessary, nor

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lence. Solutions to this vary according to the situation. When working at a college language institute with class sizes around 15, I had students buy disks and label them with their names and writing level. The disks were left in the lab where lab assistants formatted them and put them in boxes clearly marked with the writing class level and teacher's name. Both name and level were important as students sometimes forgot their teachers name, but knew their level or vice versa. This system cut down the number of disks that got "lost" during open lab hours. Lab assistants were responsible for making sure the right disks got into the right boxes.

In a high school with class sizes as high as 38, I had to implement a different system. Forty formatted disks are allocated for each of the six class periods. The disks, numbered from 1-240, are placed in two large disk banks with dividers labeled with the period number. When a teacher schedules a 2nd period class to the lab for example, the students' names are entered on a special roster with lines numbered 41-80. The teacher calls out the students' names and numbers and the students get the data disk with their number. These lists are kept in a ring binder in the lab, and students who forget their number merely check the list.

In spite of a student body of 1600 and all period 2, period 3, etc. students in the school sharing the same data disks, there have never been any problems with students from one class destroying other students' files. One reason for this is that we use the word processing program Frilless FrEdWriter which doesn't give the option of deleting files. Disks only ever get "lost" within the box because students often hurriedly stick their disk in without regard to the numeric order. This causes confusion when someone else comes along to use the disk and it's not where it should be. A solution to this is using different colored disks for each period. The disks may still get out of numeric order, but at least be in the correct class period.

A final pitfall in a lab is poor time-management. The most stressful time is the last five minutes of the period because every student wants to type until the last minute and then have the teacher save and print for them when the bell rings. Nice-guy teachers burn out quickly. There will always be a couple of "can't save on disk" or "error" messages, or one (if not all) of the printers are sure to jam. Give yourself and the students plenty of time. Making sure instructions are clearly visible, start the class saving their work and printing five minutes before the bell rings or the period ends. If you don't have bells, create your own 5-minute "clean-up bell." Having enough printers can help at this critical time. One printer to every four or five computers will prevent the tension of long lines wanting to print at the last minute.

Some of the stress and frustration that discourages teachers from using computer labs will be eliminated by good organization and planning. Once this is done the atmosphere in a lab can be cool, calm and rewarding for both students and teachers.



STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD CALL IN A SELF-ACCESS CENTRE

Vance Stevens, Sultan Qaboos University

This project surveyed the attitudes of a sample of students at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman toward using the computers to study English in the self-access Student Resource Centre (SRC) there. The survey was intended to find out:

1. how science students like using the computers in the SRC;
2. how easy using computers is for them;
3. how much English students think they are learning by using the computers in the SRC; and
4. how the above factors changed during the students' first year at SQU.

The study was broken down into the following five tasks, accomplished stepwise:

1. drawing up a question base for an instrument to assess attitudes;
2. determining through consensus of peers which questions from the base were most likely to elicit the views of the students on the points to which the instrument was directed;
3. creating a questionnaire on completion of the above step;
4. administering the instrument to a representative group of first year Foundation Science Course students; and
5. analyzing the data and examining the results.

The project surveyed the attitudes of first-year Arab university students majoring in science (75 out of 318 Foundation Science Course students) toward computer use in a self-access student resource center after having recently completed their first semester of study, and in most cases having used computers for the first time ever at the beginning of that semester.

The data suggested positive attitudes for all four of the research questions; i.e.,

1. the students enjoy using computers to study English;
2. it is fairly easy for our students to use computers in studying English;
3. the students tend to feel that they are learning English by using the computers in our SRC; and
4. the students tend to show increasingly positive attitudes with increasing exposure to computers.

In addition, the survey suggests that our Arab first-year university students:

1. feel that using computers is important;
2. use computers more now than before;
3. are becoming more confident and proficient on the computers;
4. increasingly perceive computers to be a viable medium for learning English, and
5. are not at all bored or confused by computer use.

It is difficult to establish proof of hypotheses in qualitative studies; indeed such studies are often undertaken not to rigorously establish causal relationships but to gain valuable insights into the phenomena under study. Although some care was taken with experimental design, and especially with development of the instrument, this study was no exception; rather than limit variables, the study sought to delve into student attitudes on a wide front in hopes of striking a richer lode of information.

This research was originally reported in a paper entitled "CALL in a self-access student resource centre," delivered at the 22nd Annual TESOL Convention in Chicago, 1988.

CREATING A LANGUAGE LAB: DECISIONS AND DOLLARS

Domenic Berducci, University of Pennsylvania

This paper discusses specific components in decision-making and cost estimation in language lab creation. It should not be viewed as advice to be followed blindly, but should be used as a series of relevant questions an administrator may ask before creating a lab. The choices listed in this paper resulted from a survey of 41 CAI language laboratories from universities (60%), colleges (32%) and elementary schools (8%) around the country.

Each of the following 4 sections: Facilities, Personnel, Hardware, and Software; is divided into positive and negative opinions. These opinions were taken directly from the survey responses. The number (%) following each section heading is the percentage of administrators who responded in this category.

FACILITIES: Dedicated/Non-Dedicated Space

Dedicated Space (77%): this is a space that is dedicated solely for the use of CAI. The advantage to this type of lab was that it might be used at the discretion of the administrator. Scheduling presented no problem. "Ease of control" was the respondents' main consideration.

On the negative side, dedicated space was found to be costly (the cost of one room) if the space was not continuously used. Also, a dedicated space needed more coordination. Security topped the list of concerns for those who managed dedicated labs.

Non-dedicated Space (23%): this means the use of a previously existing classroom for the lab. Since a space pre-exists, there was no need to request more space from the institution and hence no 'cost.'

Non-dedicated space meant for the respondents multi-purpose use: Teaching non-CAI and CAI classes in one room. The most apparent problem in this case was that access to the lab and its facilities was difficult to control. Students and instructors who were not computer users had access to the equipment, causing problems to the hardware, largely destruction of floppy disks and keyboards.

PERSONNEL: Lab Assistant, Instructor, Coordinator

Lab Assistant, Trained/Untrained

Trained (100%): a trained assistant aided both instructors and students. During the first few sessions in a class a remarkable amount of language instruction time was said to be 'lost' familiarizing students with the software and hardware, unless a trained assistant was used. Another use of a trained assistant was as a monitor so that students were able to use the lab in an instructor's absence.

Negatively, trained lab assistants needed extra time for training (4 hours minimum used on average, outside of normal working hours), and they commanded a higher salary than untrained (\$6 per hour as opposed to \$4 per hour for untrained). Salary was the sole consideration for choosing an untrained assistant. Administrators reported that assistants became well versed in hardware and software after one semester (15 weeks) in the lab. On the negative side they are of little help to instructors and students in the first month of a class.

Untrained (0%): none of the administrators who responded used untrained lab assistants.

Instruction in Lab: Part/Not Part of Teaching Load

Part of Teaching Load (78%): if the lab is part of the teaching load, salary will include lab instruction. Typically, students spent 20% of a semester's class time in lab instruction. Also in these cases the instructor had direct control over lab materials and students' use of these materials.

Generally instructors referred to in the survey had had no experience in using CAI. A majority (62%) were reported to have had no interest. There were often complaints about the need for more teacher preparation time with concomitant requests for more salary.

Instruction not part of teaching load (22%): if the CAI lab was not part of the teaching load, no class time was employed to learn the hardware or software. On average it took university-aged ESL students seven hours of instruction to minimally operate Word Perfect 4.2. Also, students spent more time in the lab with a teacher (outside of class time) resulting in a lower student-teacher ratio in the lab.
