A REVIEW OF ASIACALL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2012

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Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) involves the use of technology in support of teaching and learning. It aims at improving learning process and learning outcomes. Computer applications for language classrooms abound. CALL activities may range from the practice of general skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to material design or modes of instruction… These provide learners with learning options and bring more life and fun to a language class. The use of computers has become more popular both in and out of the class. And CALL continues to grow at a rapid rate in many directions.

The Asia Association of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (AsiaCALL) is an association of volunteers that are interested by people in Asia, and in other countries all over the world. There are 158 members registered on the website. People from 71 countries, 380 cities use the website of the organization. They are researchers, University teachers, high school teachers, graduate students, and administrators. There are kinds of intellectual activities, and facilities on the website. People can assess up-date information in areas of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning). They can make connections, post the research publications and some may even come to entertain. AsiaCALL has been offering annual international conferences. This year, the conference has been organized in Ho Chi Minh City Open University (HCM OU) in Vietnam. Andrew Lian, the organization president, says that he strongly believes that with the development of technology, language teaching and learning will be pushing boundaries, and stretching the limits of both our 'intellectual and technical capacities".

The 11th annual Asia CALL International Conference 2012 had its theme as "visionary CALL Paradigm for the Asia Century: Pushing the Boundaries of Learning, Teaching, Research, and Technology." This was the first time Asia CALL was held in Vietnam and also the very first International Conference being hosted by Ho Chi Minh City Open University. The Conference lasted for 3 days from November 11th to November 18th, 2012. The President of this year event was Professor Dr. Andrew Lian. The Chairman was Dr. Phạm Vũ Phi Hổ, Dr. Lê Bảo Lâm, the Rector of Ho Chi Minh City Open University and the Vice Rector – Dr. Lê Thị Thanh Thu took part in the conference with special support to the organization of the conference. The staff of the FL Department and a group of pioneer students all worked together for the success of the three-day conference.

The annual Conference was an occasion for presenters and speakers from institutions and countries in Asia and all over the world to come and share ideas and experience in Technology – Enhanced Language Learning and related fields. There were 60 presenters from 10 countries in all Asia, and some came from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

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The topics ranged from the use of video clips, Facebook, blogs, to Moodle, Wikis as tools to enhance language learning. A lot of discussions took place in area of blended learning. The topic of cultural challenges in online learning was also mentioned and analyzed. In general, all efforts were made heading to the development of theories and systems that would be able to facilitate and promote learner's autonomy, learner-centered mode of teaching and learning EFL.

Vinnie (2012), the featured speaker from Cambridge University Press started in his speech that technology is not a new idea. It has been around for many years. It began as a fad, but now ICT (Information and Communications Technology) is becoming an integrated part of ELT. Students can now observe the world, half a world away right from their class. Learning and teaching through technology are altering the interactions between teachers and students.

First, language content can be introduced as an add-on to the teaching way. Next, more authentic input can be brought into the language class with the use of digital technology. Then, boundaries of classrooms can be pushed toward the world outside. Online learning, blended courses have been changing the way teachers are teaching and how learners are doing inside and outside their classrooms.

One practical area of CALL was the use of Video clips in the language classroom. Kaiser (2012), the Associate Director of Berkeley Language Center (the US) has suggested that clips cut from feature films can be used to build up students linguistic, cultural, semiotic and symbolic competences. Films offer opportunities to expose students to natural language use in authentic contexts. Pieces of the language can be elicited using visual contexts. The use of the 1st language and translation, therefore, can be limited to the minimum. Everything in a film clip is constructed in detail. It all carries meaning. And teacher can guide learners to explore "alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things".

The cultural artifacts, practices, attitudes should be focused on to work out meanings, values and beliefs. These embedded elements can lead to deeper understanding of linguistic formulations. Film clips can also bring more live factors such as a variety of speech patterns, regional dialects and sociolects into the class world. Text books and school syllabuses usually have less room for these because of the time constraint. Possible limitations of film in a language class may come from its rapid pace and lack of specific focus in the view of course objectives.

Tran Vu Diem Thuy (2012) from HCMC Open University, Vietnam presented the topic: the use of student-made video clips for English Speaking Practice. The paper reports an investigation into undergraduates' expectations and awareness of applying IT to English communication. Fifty senior students at one private university located in Ho Chi Minh City were invited to make video recordings of their verbal English performance. The recordings had to be happening in a naturalistic environment such as in a museum, at a restaurant… The students were asked to group themselves into smaller ones, each of which consisted four or five students creating a video recording and the group members were the 'characters' in the clip. The topics for clips could be chosen from a given list including positive and negative aspects in students' life, traveling, tour guiding, personal experiments, their own hobbies, and so on.

The task focuses on students' practice speaking English through a context where

they feel comfortable to meet their own needs. Otherwise, the purpose of this task is to self-evaluate their pronunciation, judge both fluency and accuracy features of their speech, and transform student learning with technology. Qualitative data through group interviews have shown that students prefer to use this mode of English speaking practice, which is described as a tool to both self-evaluate English speaking skill and apply IT to their learning English.

Ono (2012) from Tsukuba University, Japan did a research about project-based movie presentation as a course model. The research was conducted at a university and a college in Japan. Students attended CALL rooms making movies in groups, telling their own stories with the help of LMS (language - mediated system). This project-based model invited students to make use of digital pictures, music or any effect made into a movie. The process of narration was a procedure of meaning making. The students could reflect what they knew, examine their assumptions. These, in fact recorded their cognitive development process. In short, the task-based model provided a record of students' thinking.

Common topics such as promoting hometowns, college, club activities, or library were suggested. Students worked in groups to share peer supporting. These projects were collected every week and showed to other groups in class. The point was that everybody could make it. The result showed that in 4 weeks, learners' anxiety about using the FL decreased, and the awareness of computer skills and information skills increased. Digital story-telling did encourage warmer collaborative work, improve computer literacy and enhance learners' motivation.

Another major direction in this year conference was the application of social media such as the use of Facebook, and blogs in the language classroom. Facebook is a large social website. According to Facebook usage statistics in March 2012 (Halvorsen (2012) from Thailand), the number of users worldwide are 900 million. There are about 500 million daily users of the site, 70 different languages are used on sites, and over 80% of the users are from nations other than the US. The numbers of Facebook users continue to grow at rapid rates. Today, more students are becoming digital natives of the various websites on the Internet. The questions are how teachers should take advantages of them as constructive tools in language classrooms, and how learners can use Facebook to learn a new language.

Facebook and other network sites have been used for many purposes. Members can connect with others in a kind of a community. They may make friends, share interests, ideas or information in a private and safe way. It also offers users opportunities to interact with peers anywhere, and anytime they are. The use of authentic language in contexts can be utilized as the tool to help learners observe and experience the rules of language usage. Therefore, this may fill in the gaps of text book language materials and make language learning be fun (Lian (2012), Australia.)

There are all kinds of groups on Facebook. Joining groups not only helps learners practice and improve their language fluency, but also share responsibility, and therefore increase a sense of belonging. This group application can make Facebook a learning tool as well as an effective communicative tool. In addition, learners can, at times connect to speakers of others language backgrounds. Then, they can observe and develop cross-cultural understanding which is important to bilingual language users. In short, Facebook could be a fast, convenient tool for learners to improve their language competences.

Teachers can make use of high tech applications such as Facebook to motivate and facilitate learners' collaboration. EFL pages can be created on sites. Teachers can post class events, activities, design types of learning tasks, set up rules, and check learners feedback. Teaching with the support of technology innovations can push L2 classroom toward life, crossing the boundaries of a traditional class. The introduction of authentic language from the sites can bring positive transformation to the "telling and testing" pedagogy. Teacher-centered classrooms can move ahead to student-centered learning environments. Learners will be more independent in the way they share and construct their L2 knowledge.

In one presentation, two presenters, Srikrai, and Punkasikul (2012) from Kon Kaen University, Thailand initiated an online journal project to boost English writing skills. Facebook was used as a tool to assign writing tasks and exchange simultaneous comments within members of groups in class. 100 students took part in the project. They were English majors in their 2nd years. First, all the students met in class and closed groups were set up. They worked with members of their groups; each posted 4 journal writing pieces during the 45 hours course. Two should be posted before the midterm test, and 2 before the final one. The limit of a journal was 1 paragraph (150-200 words). The topic was free and each comment could be written in 15-100 words. The students were required to write in formal language. The teacher gave comments to promote writing fluency. At the end of the course, a questionnaire was used to collect information about student feedback about the writing process.

Findings from the project were positive. The students found it interesting to write at anytime they were and give comments to anyone they liked. They felt less afraid of making mistakes and therefore, could write with more confidence. They had chances to correct each other's mistakes, share knowledge or ideas, and even learn to catch up with technology. The classroom environment became friendlier, and more collaborative.

Mohamad and Omar (2012) from Malaysia investigated the use of asynchronous forum as a discussion tool in a reading course. The learners were adults in their first year distance-study. Most of them worked and studied part-time to improve their reading in English. The course lasted 17 weeks, with 2 weeks face-to-face class meetings. Two units in the course materials were designed in the form of hypermedia documents followed by comprehension questions. Learners completed the assignments and gave ideas, shared viewpoints and exchanged knowledge online. A questionnaire and interviews were used to collect corroborative data, and the result showed that the online forum did motivate distance learners to do their reading tasks which prepared them better for the final reading tests.

Blended learning is a large area with many presentations this year. The term blending itself has a variety of meaning. Chattopadyay (2012), a speaker defines it is a mix. Blended learning is not new. Teachers have traditionally made use of a combination of teaching and learning methods. AsiaCALL 2012 presentations focus on the combination of online and face to face learning. This blended approach is believed as to facilitate active learning and to motivate interactions.

"What is to blend in blended learning?" Kalyan cited Whitelock, (2004) who defines blended learning as a mode of delivery rather than a pedagogical approach, teachers have used the traditional types of technology like cassette recordings,

CDs or films in their classrooms. Today, modern technology offers learners with word processing, digital photos or videos, course management systems and Internet (Mohammad Vasim Kaji, India). Students are using computers increasingly. Therefore, it is a necessity and a potential to facilitate more effective learning by the use of multi-media applications.

Technology today is transforming the way we are learning with the help of ICT. Language classroom boundaries could be crossed. There should be new directions in learning and pedagogy. All we need to do is to use technology to bring about the transformation. One word of caution is that high-tech applications should not be used so much to teach the same thing in different way. Therefore, the teachers must decide what is appropriate, what is available, what their learners want in order to assist them in their learning. In short, we need to know the way and lead with technology not the other way (Sabieh (2012) from Notre Dame University, Berut, Lebanon)

Wikis, and Mooddles are topics of many researchers this year. Basically, they are kinds of online management systems. Teachers use them as class management tools to conduct training courses. Dr. Lê Huy Lâm (2012), a key note speaker presented a study about the use of Wikis in a course of Instructional Technology at the Graduate Division, Open University, Vietnam. The study found that Wikis provided excellent class management tools especially for large classes. They could be used to organize and display content effectively. They also supported synchronous, group work collaboration. Therefore, student's engagement, interactions and motivation were high. Teachers should be trained to use the system. There were basic features of the system like setting up rules or conventions, designing structure, controlling assessment. Limitations of Wikis could be the storage and access limits. Students feedback on the use of Wikis were positive as the system provided a time saving, and flexible tool of study.

As a conclusion, technology is developing rapidly. People are now spending more time online. Our world today is becoming more and more socially globalizing with the use of the Internet. These changes bring about great transformations in language teaching and learning.

Asian CALL has been founded to assist those interested in the area of Computer – Assisted Language learning. The Organization hopes to spread the use of modern technology in EFL teaching and learning with both theory and technology supports. With appropriate use of current technical applications, it is hopeful that we, teachers and our language learners can break from our past - the teacher-centered mode of teaching- to head to a new direction in a future to learn a language by living it. Andrew Lian, President of AsiaCALL, concluded in his speech: "Life can be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards".

The AsiaCALL International Confrerence 2012 organized in HCM OU has been a success. It has brought a lot of knowledge and benefits to the participants. The next AsiaCALL conference 2013 will be held in Kon Kaen University, Thailand.

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