ENGLISH LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE COMBINED WITH ICT – KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT BORDERS

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Abstract: The number of technological innovations is growing rapidly every day along with the growth of the English language. These innovations are changing the way in which we communicate, learn and teach (Jarvis 2005). Computers have taken their place as a natural part of the language learning process (Warschauer 1999). In addition, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) in the language classroom is developing as quickly as computer technology itself develops. It would seem necessary to explain here approaches to CALL in order to have a better insight into theory related to the specific teaching focus. High technology, especially computers, is valuable resource for the modern language teacher who is expected to develop and enhance his/her professional skills. Language centers throughout the world accepts the fact that computers are essential for learning purposes (Jones 2001). However, some teachers admit the importance of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) but still remain uncommitted to it. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) may be defined as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (Levy 1997:1). Nunan (2003: 248) defines CALL as “any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language”. Accordingly, it is argued that “CALL should not be too closely associated with self-access or autonomy and that teachers are needed to drive the CALL process” (Jones 2001: 360). The intention is to show here in this paper how CALL concepts and techniques may enhance learners’ writing skills. One of the focuses of the paper, firstly, is to discuss CALL background with the emphasis on the principles for teaching CALL and previous applications in terms of writing skills. Secondly, it will explain teaching context with the highlight on the age, level and needs of students in university teaching context in Serbia. Thirdly, this paper will consider project rationale by giving the aims’ explanation, description and evaluation of it according to chosen criteria. Finally, the paper will outline broader implications of the analyses. The purpose of this paper is to show the usefulness of a computer and a website as mediators between teacher and learners who need advice, comments and feedback about their writing improvement. More research is needed on best applicable CALL approach in the university teaching context (university students of advanced level in Serbia), especially as teachers grow in familiarity with the programs, and students become more accustomed to writing on computers (Grimes and Warschauer, 2006). Another purpose of this paper is to discuss the progress of the group’s project (Developing a website for writing skills improvement with a focus on students in university teaching context) from initial planning to final presentation.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Language Learning, English language, university students, writing skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION
The number of technological innovations is growing rapidly every day along with the growth of English language. These innovations are changing the way in which we communicate, learn and teach (Jarvis 2005). High technology, especially computers, is valuable resource for the modern language teacher who is expected to develop and enhance his/her professional skills. Language centres throughout the world recognise that computers are essential for learning purposes (Jones, 2001). However, some teachers admit the importance of computer-assisted
language learning (CALL) but still remain uncommitted to it. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) may be defined as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (Levy, 1997:1). Nunan (2003: 248) defines CALL as “any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language”. Accordingly, it is argued that “CALL should not be too closely associated with self-access or autonomy and that teachers are needed to drive the CALL process” (Jones, 2001: 360). My intention is to show here in this report how CALL concepts and techniques may enhance learners’ writing skills.

One of the focuses of this paper, firstly, is to discuss CALL background with the emphasis on the principles for teaching CALL and previous applications in terms of writing skills. Secondly, we will explain teaching context with the highlight on the age, level and needs of students in university teaching context in Serbia. Thirdly, this paper will consider project rationale by giving the aims’ explanation, description and evaluation of it according to chosen criteria. Finally, the paper will outline broader implications of the conducted analyses.

2. BACKGROUND TO TEACHING WITH CALL

Approaches to CALL

Computers have taken their place as a natural part of the language learning process (Warschauer 1999). In addition, CALL in the language classroom is developing as quickly as computer technology itself develops. It would seem necessary to explain here approaches to CALL in order to have a better insight into theory related to the chosen teaching focus.

In terms of approaches to CALL, Bax (2003) mentions Restricted CALL (where teacher’s role is restricted to monitoring and the feedback is restricted to closed responses), Open CALL (relatively open in giving feedback to students, in teacher’s role and in choosing software types) and Integrated CALL which does not yet exist to any significant degree, but in Bax’s view represents an aim towards which we should be working. Now, Warschauer and Kern (2000) argue that we can understand changes in how computers have been used in language teaching within the context of structural, cognitive and sociocognitive orientations. According to Warschauer and Kern (ibid.), the role of computers in structural approach is to provide unlimited drill, practice, tutorial explanation and corrective feedback. In cognitive approach, computers’ role is to provide language input while in sociocognitive approach computers’ role is to provide alternative contexts for social interaction. In the context of social competencies, we have to be aware of the construct of assertiveness which is viewed as a manifestation of social and emotional intelligence or as social behaviour that contributes to an adequate adaptation of an individual in social interactions, maintaining socially desirable relationships and emotional well-being of participants in a social interaction (Milovanovic et. al, 2016: 290). In the process of using computers many would argue that we might lose socially desirable relationships. Further, Nunan (2003: 249) points out that still most common form of CALL programmes are behaviorist “computer-based gap-fill drills”, in which learners fill in information in close exercises. Learners are rewarded by small positive responses including the right to move to a new level of drill. This approach is closely associated with B.F. Skinner’s behaviorist theories that found practical application in programmed instruction or programmed learning (ibid.). Then, Nunan (ibid.) notes that knowledge we possess is organized into interrelated patterns which he defines as schema theory. He then goes on to explain that schema theory is the foundation of constructivist approach. A typical constructivist program involves the learner in a kind of a quest, in which the teaching and learning are achieved by completing some other task.

As a way forward, we give an outline of specific approaches in terms of writing, which is the skill area we are focusing on. Warschauer (1999, 2002) explicates a study that examined how three different teachers integrated technology into their second language writing classrooms. Each of the teachers took different approach on what constitutes academic writing: formalist, constructivist and social constructivist. In the formalist approach, students used the computer to complete grammar exercises and formulaic writing tasks common to many basic writing classrooms. In other words, academic writing was seen as a set of sub-skills that led to a grammatically-correct product in the form of a traditional five paragraph essay. In the constructivist approach, writing is viewed not just an academic task but as having personal meaning where the teacher uses computers to involve his/her students in genres such as multimedia. This is the case in university teaching context where by developing an interactive website (see Appendix 1) for writing skills improvement, students are given an opportunity to open up a range of literary skills, not just formal academic writing skills. Furthermore, Warschauer (1999, 2002) explains a social constructivist approach by pointing out that in this approach there is a shift away from viewing technology as the means by which conventional beliefs about writing and teaching of writing could be made more efficient, and toward a vision of technology as driving new approaches to literacy instruction.
Current interest, in this paper, is to use a computer and a website as mediators between teacher and learners who need advice, comments and feedback about their writing improvement. More research is needed on best applicable CALL approach in the chosen teaching context (university students of advanced level in Serbia), especially as teachers grow in familiarity with the programs, and students become more accustomed to writing on computers (Grimes and Warschauer, 2006).

**The principles for teaching CALL**

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on principles for teaching CALL according to Nunan (2003). Nunan (2003:252-4) points out four principles for teaching CALL: 1) evaluate the appropriateness of the software program or computer-based resource; 2) create an environment in which CALL is supported; 3) monitor learner participation in CALL programs and encourage autonomy and 4) encourage the use of CALL programs as a starting point for collaboration and learner interaction.

In order to evaluate the appropriateness of the website, we should consider teachers’ and learners’ motivation to use this particular website as well as their needs for using it. Secondly, we should explore website objectives and note if they are realistic. Thirdly, website authenticity should be taken into account as well as the quality of feedback given to students, then role of the learner/teacher and technological appropriateness. Since students in our teaching context (future class teachers at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina) are of advanced level, we believe that they would be interested in using this website because it would give them the possibility of self-planning and free navigation through its pages. Also, they receive brief feedback by completing a test that could be easily reached by choosing a link. Fourthly, creating an environment in order to support students’ interaction by sharing ideas in terms of their common progress may be done by creating a blog. Students will be in position then to send comments to each other or to ask questions. Fifthly, website that we have created encourages students, in a way, to take on the responsibility for their own learning (e.g. Dickinson 1992, Lake 1997). Finally, we believe that the website, mentioned previously, may encourage collaboration as the learners simultaneously search for information to support in their discussions. Thus, it may be argued that websites designed for language learning may enhance learner’s language skills as well as his/her writing skills. The teacher is no longer the only source of language. Instead, he facilitates the process of learning by advising students how to use exposed various linguistic examples online. This was exactly our intention when we were making plans to create a website. Therefore, it goes without saying that empirical research is needed to test the usefulness of the website for the particular teaching context.

3. **TEACHING CONTEXT**

The internet with its versatility opened new approaches to teaching and learning foreign language. In and out of the classroom, students find the language on websites and they communicate ideas with other people speaking the target language. The website we created, was designed for adult learners, that is, for students in university teaching context in Serbia. Students, from 19 to 24 years of age, are of advanced level and they are future class teachers at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina who are studying methodology of English language teaching as an additional course. For these students effective writing instruction involves providing individual feedback on their essays. That is extraordinary time-consuming. University English teacher will have over 100 students in their various courses. For this reason, the ability to provide detailed feedback on writing demands high level of skills and training of a teacher (Warschauer and Ware, 2006). This idea finds an echo in Sullivan and Lindgren (2002) where they point out that extra request is placed on L2 teachers of English who need to provide school leavers with life-long learning techniques that will help them learning English without being teacher-dependant (Dickinson, 1992). Hence, we created a website in order to give students an opportunity to manage their learning more independently and to give the teacher a possibility to easily guide and monitor his students through the website during the lessons. In line with previously said, Stojanovic, Milovanovic and Cirkovic-Miladinovic (2016: 141) believe that computers offer a great possibility to play in the classroom and outside it. They proved in the research that the influence of play on the development of creativity, thinking, writing and the conversation ability is considerable and very important (ibid.).

4. **PROJECT RATIONALE**

According to Warschauer and Ware (2006), greater attention to foreign language writing began in the 1980s, and has continued to increase until today, due to demands of many universities that require high scores for writing
tests. Yet, not many teachers in university teaching context have time and space to prepare their students for passing tests (e.g. IELTS, FCE, CPE etc.). For this reason, our intention was to create a website (Appendix 1) that would give students the possibility of learning and enhancing their writing skills both in classes with the teacher’s assistance and in their own time.

The aim of the project is to improve students’ writing skills and help them to overcome the difficulties they encounter. The purpose of creating a website is to provide an opportunity for a learner to plan his own learning and to seek information he needs. In this way, we suppose that a student will be more enthusiastic for a task and will have more success in autonomous learning situation (Lee, 1998).

**Project description**

The website we have created consists six main pages, that is, home page, photos, useful links, ELTD (English Language Teacher Development) blog, favourite links and students’ corner page. In home page users are introduced to the purpose of the website in terms of writing skills improvement. The next page ‘photos’ provides a photo gallery with photos from students’ seminars and workshops. The intention for creating this page was to motivate students to take part in group discussions and to post their classmates’ photos and their own. The ‘useful links’ page provide students with links that are leading to language tests and explanations, online English grammar, tips for good writing, assessment tests, practice revision and editing a text. ELTD CALL blog page is made for the purpose of exchanging ideas and comments, so the interaction between students is taken into account. By using this page students may ask their teacher a question and the teacher may use this page for answering that question. Also, other students will be able to see this question as well as the teacher’s reply. Hence, this will highlight the teacher-student and student-student relationship and improve the online communication process.

Further, page ‘favourite links’ provides some links that are leading to language quizzes. Teachers and students might benefit from developing and using such an online quiz, which would not require sophisticated authoring tools (Chapelle and Douglas 2006). This is also an opportunity to practice writing skills and have fun at the same time. Finally, we have created ‘students’ corner’ where students are allowed to leave their comments or other information which can then be viewed and added to by other visitors. Exploring the website, students might be expected to manage their learning more independently. However, the teacher’s role in guiding students and helping them in their learning is also very important. Jones (2001) argues that students can only learn from computers with the instruction and supervision of teachers and he adds that CALL will not be effective without this essential interaction of teachers and students. Therefore, teachers should be given time to develop pathways for their learners and for those teachers who are more committed to provide adequate training in using website materials in their language classrooms.

**Project evaluation**

In order to evaluate the project we will use firstly, the ‘Checklist: Evaluative criteria for computer-delivered language learning systems’ that was presented in the Invitational Symposium on Assessing and Advancing Technology Options in Language Learning (AATOLL) in February 1998 in Honolulu. Secondly, we will evaluate the project according to guidelines for evaluating web sites for ESL learners based on Graus (1999) and Nelson (1997) given in Chen (1999). Finally, we will evaluate created website by comparing it to BBC British Council Teaching English website.

According to the checklist, mentioned above, it is important that the writing software or a website provides written text at the appropriate level of difficulty with the choice of type of input. This is what our website provides. It does not provide videos or listening passages. Then, in terms of writing activities, writing tasks have counterparts in the real world, they are at the appropriate level of difficulty and students have a chance to choose the task. Further, we may note the lack of writing strategy instruction which is left for a teacher to do in language classes. As far as writing tools are concerned, we may say that the website provides templates for organizing the writing tasks, online thesaurus, grammar instructions, spell checker and grammar checker. Lastly, we believe that students are given enough time for task completion because students may study on their own and plan their time. Users’ queries may be kept as records by using the blog page as well as providing a space for group work. There is no option for printing or saving successful drafts. Therefore, according to the criteria evaluation list we may conclude on a cautionary note that the website we have created has a potential that needs to be improved.

Chen (1999) evaluates websites according to the combined criteria of Graus (1999) and Nelson (1997) that he revised. So, Chen (ibid.) suggests that websites should be evaluated according to the source (is it trustworthy, rated by known authority), purpose, pedagogy, design, contents, access and learners’ needs. The website we have created is not rated by known authority, yet it is created for the purpose of enhancing writing skills in the specific teaching context, in my case in university teaching context in Serbia. In terms of pedagogy provided, we may say that
feedback and instructions are provided with the combination of teacher’s guidelines in classes. Design should be improved in order to navigate the website more easily. Accurate information and comprehensiveness is provided by choosing relevant links. Then, we may say that the website is easy to reach and the downloading time is about 3-5 seconds. Finally, in terms of learners’ needs, we believe that the website corresponds to their needs and language difficulties by providing useful information in one place. Thus, learners do not need to wander through web in order to find writing tests and explanations; all they need is just to enter the website that is designed for them. This website is of a closed type and can be used only for the mentioned purposes.

In our teaching context (students at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina), websites may provide student teachers, trainers, and school supervisors with more insight into the development of practical knowledge, teaching behaviour, and thought processes (Tanner, et. al. 2000). By choosing a website and by independently selecting tests to assess themselves, student teachers may become more aware of the quality of their writing skills as well as having better insight in their overall improvement.

Moreover, mentioned website is evaluated by our students. Group “A” thinks that “the content is very well chosen for students to use” and that “having such a website will help us improve our writing skills”. They also added: “You have produced something that resembles a professional webpage. Well-done”. Furthermore, group “B” wrote that “it is a very useful blog that provides many links to help us improve our writing skills. It’s also practical for teachers to adopt some good ideas or materials from the links. We think this blog is close to a self-assess learning website”. Anyway, at this point, we cannot know whether the website we have created is efficient or not in helping learners to overcome their writing problems, thence further empirical research is needed.

To sum up briefly, we may say that websites are an extremely valuable way of encouraging students, future class teachers and future English teachers, to work on their own professional development either by creating a website for their own purpose or by using those already exist.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Websites vary greatly in the quality so they require continuous appraisal/evaluation, which means more work for the teacher who is willing to use them in his language classroom. For this reason, we believe that our students will use web sources in their self-directed language learning by critically evaluating them. Yet, we have to have in mind that learners, especially those of lower proficiency, may not have developed the navigational skills needed to find what they want; and even if they did manage to find it they may not know how to exploit the material. In this case, help of a teacher and face-to-face interaction in the class would be of great benefit (Miloovanovic et.al, 2016). These are the problems we have encountered but on a more positive note, we believe that our students can learn from this experience and to be more proficient in choosing and using on-line material in the future.

It is vital to create opportunities to make the teachers implement CALL technology by integrating it into the syllabus and not to be an extra add-on which is used whenever ‘there is time’ (Ioannou-Georgiou, 2006). A process which schedules technology into regular syllabus activities helps teachers and students view and use technology as an integral part of the lesson. Furthermore, this group project offered us a chance to act as an agent of change within our teaching context together with our students. Creating and choosing appropriate materials together with students, gave us the opportunity to discuss, evaluate and implement more effective techniques in teaching and to enhance the old ones as well.

REFERENCES

Appendix 1