Chapter 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The use of computers for language learning dates back to the late 50s of the previous century. Since then language teachers have always been among the first to apply the potential of new technologies for learning and teaching-related purposes (for historical overviews, see e.g. Beatty, 2003; Levy, 1997). During the last 15 years, language teachers seem to have been particularly well served by the development of the Internet/World Wide Web, which offers virtually limitless possibilities for exposure to authentic, situated language material, fostering communication, and raising cultural awareness. The Web fits in well with the latest insights in language learning and teaching and should therefore perhaps be the medium of choice for any language teacher today. Given the pervasiveness of the Web in all aspects of society, including teachers’ private, social and professional lives (Arnold & Ducate, 2006), one would expect a significant use of it in language education.

Reality is different, however. Many efforts to promote the use of technology for language learning, generally known as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), have not paid off yet. As a result, there continues to be a substantial gap between the potential and the practice of CALL.

More than ten years ago, Levy (1997) remarked that “CALL remains a peripheral interest in the language teaching community as a whole, still largely the domain of the CALL enthusiast, and there is scant evidence to suggest that CALL has really been absorbed into mainstream thinking, education, and practice” (p. 3). More recent studies on the integration of CALL suggest that use may be on the increase, but that CALL is not yet one of the standard features of language teaching. Taalas (2005), whose research on technology integration in language learning is based on a longitudinal study in Finland covering the period between 1994 and 2001, concludes that the use of technology has increased, but it has “not become institutionalised or common
practice” (p. 184). Moreover, it is not particularly “innovative” in the sense of applying recent pedagogical insights. The use of technology as such should not be equated with innovative pedagogical practice. As Blake (2008a) points out, one of the persistent myths in technology use for language learning and teaching is that technology constitutes a methodology. For technology use to be regarded as innovative it must be informed by a methodological framework that is regarded as innovative. Felix (1999) remarks that grammar-based teaching is an important activity delivered through the Web, but that more “student-centred learning, reflected in meaningful task-based activities, which exploits the new medium’s unique potential for authentic learning experiences” (p. 86) is not yet much in evidence. She re-iterates the point in Felix (2003). Another study on technology integration, Barr (2004), reveals that CALL has not yet made its way into mainstream education in the three universities that he studied (although the level of acceptance varies) and that teachers are frequently concerned about various practical and organisational issues related to its use. Yet another European study on the impact of ICT on foreign language teaching observes:

Statistical studies reveal increasing awareness on the part of authorities of the importance of access to the new technologies, and the learner/computer ratio in schools and other sectors of education in Europe has improved dramatically. On the other hand, the use and deployment of information and communications technologies in language teaching and learning is far from satisfactory as ICT resources are traditionally reserved for “(computer) science” subjects, and rarely assigned to arts subjects.


Bax (2003), assessing the current state-of-the-art of CALL by introducing the concept of “normalisation” (see chapter 2 for further discussion), also concludes that “[i]n terms of true integration of CALL within language teaching and learning […], we are still a long way from achieving it, and it is
important therefore to start to reconsider how the profession can move forward towards that general aim” (p. 23). Finally, Arnold and Ducate (2006), discussing the situation from an American perspective, come to more or less the same conclusion:

From these findings, it appears that although the use of technology by K-12 teachers and university faculty has improved in the last 15 years, we still have a long way to go before the majority of teachers views educational technology in general and CALL in particular as a legitimate teaching and learning tool and uses it on a regular basis in the classroom. This supports our earlier assessment that the widespread integration of innovative CALL has not yet been achieved.

(Arnold & Ducate, 2006: 6)

The potential of CALL is thus not utilised to the full, both in terms of the number of regular users and in terms of the kinds of applications used. The general claim is that too few teachers are using CALL and that those who are using it may not always be employing it in ways that are considered pedagogically innovative. The problem of use therefore involves both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. For discussing the integration of CALL in teaching and learning, it will be necessary to consider these two dimensions.

That computers are not used widely for learning-related purposes is by no means a problem exclusive to CALL. Twining (2002) presents an extensive, well-documented discussion of the literature focusing on the discrepancy between the claims made for ICT on the one hand and the reality of use on the other. The discrepancy has led major critics like Cuban (2001) to call into question the huge investments in technology for education. Twining concurs with these views and the perspectives on CALL expressed above when he states that “there is overwhelming evidence that ICT is not being used
extensively and/or effectively across the curriculum in the majority of schools” (Twining, 2002: 2).

The ‘potential-practice gap’ is therefore for real. It poses a serious challenge to the further emancipation of CALL as a viable option for language learning and teaching. As a consequence, a key issue in CALL remains how to bridge this gap between the potential use of CALL and the reality of use.

Many studies point to the need to improve teacher education and professional development. The emphasis should be on establishing appropriate links between technology use and pedagogy, not on technology as such (Taalas, 2005), to make CALL an obligatory component in pre-service or in-service teacher education (Arnold & Ducate, 2006) and to provide education on technology integration not by setting it up as a single course but by infusing technology throughout teacher education programmes (Desjardins & Peters, 2007), to mention but a few of the suggestions put forward to improve teacher training (see also: Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004; Egbert, Paulus, & Nakamichi, 2002; Gillespie & Barr, 2002; Hubbard & Levy, 2006a; International Certificate Conference, 2003; Kassen, Lavine, Murphy-Judy, & Peters, 2007).

But implementation of technology-enhanced language learning and teaching is not just about CALL teacher education. It also involves establishing the frameworks of language learning and teaching on the basis of which decisions about technology use can be made; taking into account institutional developments that precipitate or hinder the use of technology; and setting up adequate structures for technological and pedagogical support. The educational environment affects the use of technology for pedagogical purposes either positively or negatively. Lack of appropriate resources (technical infrastructure, human support, time) and absence of a supportive climate for change (management support, incentives, etc.) may all be working against the widening and deepening of the use of ICT in the curriculum.
This study will address implementation from this broad institutional perspective. If promoting a more pervasive and meaningful use of ICT for language teaching and learning becomes a priority on the institutional agenda an integrated, holistic approach is required which is capable of addressing the many aspects involved in implementation. Many institutions have embraced the potential of technology for learning, usually by adopting some kind of e-learning strategy (OECD, 2005). But without appropriate measures to promote the use of technology for learning at all levels of the organisation these efforts may remain fruitless and not offer solutions to the increasing number of teachers, especially language teachers, showing an interest in using ICT to enhance teaching and learning in meaningful ways.

In some respects the field of CALL seems particularly well-positioned to make this move forward. CALL research has developed substantially during the past few decades. It has a strong focus on linking pedagogy and technology. This encourages principled accounts of technology use for language learning. As a consequence, a wealth of examples of pedagogically motivated applications of CALL is now available and there is a growing body of evidence that the use of computers may be beneficial for language learning under specific conditions. However, much research focuses on the use of one particular program or tool by a single teacher (usually the researcher herself), often in experimental settings. The theoretical basis frequently concerns the technology-pedagogy interface, while less attention is paid to what it takes to carry successful applications of CALL beyond the level of individual teachers to achieve sustainable integration at the institutional level.

Although CALL practitioners and researchers are beginning to address this issue (Barr, 2004; Taalas, 2005), there continues to be a distinct need to investigate what is known about effective language learning by means of computers in relation to what is known about effective strategies for implementation in educational institutions. This requires a framework of implementation which not only addresses the pedagogical aspects but also the
organisational aspects of CALL. The framework has to be sufficiently general to take on board the many different ways in which computers can be used for language learning and teaching, and yet it has to be sufficiently constrained to provide direction to those involved in implementing CALL for institutional uses. The framework should make it easier to identify which forms of computing make sense for language teaching and learning, and which do not; how an awareness of this can be raised with teachers, students, and management; and how conditions can be created which favour the meaningful use of computers for language teaching and learning.

This study is intended to contribute to developing such a framework. The study is based on extensive literature research in CALL, SLA, language pedagogy, and more general accounts of using technology for learning-related purposes; surveys administered to CALL users during the last few years; and the author’s extensive practical experience in this area as a teacher of English and a CALL coordinator and project manager.

The study explores the options for developing a framework for the implementation of ICT-integrated language learning and teaching which tries to accommodate both the pedagogical aspects and the organisational aspects of the use of CALL. By linking theory to practice and assessing practice in the light of theory, it tries to reveal critical factors of implementation that are not often considered in the CALL literature.

The emphasis on institutional implementation implies that the focus will be on a range of technologies used together rather than on any one technology in particular. The affordances of these technologies will be explored in relation to a conceptual framework based on principles of task-based language teaching. This provides direction to the technology options for language pedagogy, but it does not necessarily imply that this is the only framework which can serve this purpose. The options for implementation are studied in the institutional setting, which is one of the reasons why it is linked to the
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Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is increasingly used to offer guidance to language learning, teaching and assessment in institutional contexts in Europe.

The educational setting to which the study applies is SL/FL learning and teaching in HE, especially in the university context. It is a setting where opportunities for face-to-face (class-based) learning exist alongside opportunities for learning with computers. It is not a CALL-only or distance-only context. It assumes that language teachers, language learners and network-based computer technology are all present in this setting, making different configurations of ICT-supported language learning possible. Which configurations are selected and why is one of the central questions addressed in this study.

The study draws extensively on our experiences in implementing different forms of CALL during the past 15 years at the University of Groningen and other HE institutions in the Netherlands, assessing them in the light of changing technologies and pedagogies and the degree to which these have affected language learning and teaching at our institutions over time. The theoretical underpinnings for the study come from the general literature on the implementation of education technology on the one hand, and language-specific theories and research findings on the other.

The principles and concepts underlying the study are outlined in detail in chapter 2. The chapter gives definitions and descriptions of relevant terms and concepts and introduces the three main frameworks by which this study has been informed. The frameworks concerned are Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), in particular teaching-oriented accounts of this framework, the CEFR, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages referred to above, and the Flexibility-Activity Framework, a framework that holds potential for addressing aspects of learning technology use in the educational context more generally. These frameworks provide the conceptual
background from which the analysis of technology in teaching practice, as evidenced by projects (chapter 3 and 4) and an international survey (chapter 5), will be pursued and from which the potential of implementing technology in light of a task-based pedagogical framework (chapters 6 and 7), and making it work in the institutional setting (chapter 8), will be outlined.

Chapter 3 takes the reader back to the use of CALL some fifteen years ago by discussing the development of the Hologram project, a project which was typical in several respects of implementation of technology in language teaching and learning at that time. The chapter deliberately sketches the wider setting in which the project (and program) were conceived to demonstrate aspects of the conceptual framework introduced in chapter 2.

Chapter 4 discusses the use of technology on the basis of an analysis of two teaching innovation projects carried out during the last eight years. This introduces contemporary perspectives on the use of technology and pedagogy and on the institutional setting in which they were meant to be used. Possibly the focus on a range of technologies that are now beginning to be applied more broadly within institutions is experienced by CALL experts as not representing the latest developments in the field (the technologies are definitely not representative of recent publications in the CALL literature or at CALL conferences), but this is inevitable in a study focusing on institution-wide implementation rather than pioneering efforts in CALL. The consideration of such uses on the basis of a contemporary methodological framework will open up the perspective that practices which are supported by traditional technologies are not necessarily traditional practices.

More substantial evidence for this point of view is given in chapter 5. This chapter gives an extensive report of an international survey, specifically developed in the context of this research, which identifies patterns of technology use similar to that observed in the projects reported on in chapter 4, but tries to associate these uses more closely with language teachers' views
on the role of technology and pedagogy in relation to the educational environments in which they work, and the levels of support available in that environment.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus more explicitly on the potential of technology in teaching-oriented accounts of TBLT, which usually make only scant reference to ICT and have a strong bias towards interaction in the classroom. Chapter 6 discusses a range of technologies in relation to designing effective and efficient language learning tasks on the basis of proposals in pedagogical TBLT frameworks. Chapter 7 proceeds beyond the level of individual tasks to the use of technology in relation to the TBLT-based curriculum (without considering all the intricacies associated with sequencing of tasks (Ellis, 2003: 220-229)). It looks at the usefulness of virtual learning environments (VLEs) at the level of the curriculum and at technology tools that have been specifically designed on the basis of the CEFR (which gives an outcome-based perspective to organising tasks at the curriculum level).

Chapter 8 considers additional strategic issues and aspects of institutional support that are relevant for actually getting technology to be used by students and staff in the institution.

Finally, chapter 9 summarises the main findings of this study and places them in a broader perspective. It makes suggestions for further research, most notably in verifying aspects of the framework we have sought to outline, but for which empirical evidence has yet to be adduced.