Gill PHILIP

CALLING OUT FOR SOME CHANGES

I. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, computer assisted language learning (CALL) has revolutionised autonomous language learning. It has been the most important improvement since the introduction of another kind of CALL - cassette-assisted language learning - which brought about the rise and rise of language laboratories. In present times, the cassette has fallen by the wayside, having been ousted by the more flexibile and user-friendly options provided by high-tech computer applications. By way of introduction to this paper, let us take a moment to examine what CALL is, or what it purports to be, and why, if at all, some changes might be necessary.

II. CALL = COMPUTER + ASSISTED + LANGUAGE + LEARNING?

In an attempt to answer this question, we need to look at whether or not the term CALL amounts to the sum of its parts. It is of course a *computer*-assisted method, as opposed to *book-*, *library-*, *pen-* or *cassette*-assisted methods. Hitting the nail squarely on the head, Warschauer (1999: 2) suggests that CALL is referred to by name because it is set apart from traditional teaching methods: it is a special category of language learning tools which is still considered to be something out of the ordinary. Mansfield reiterates this, stressing the point that CALL is not a *methodology* as such, which would imply that it involves a new approach to teaching, but a *tool*, and therefore really no more remarkable than the book, library or pen (Mansfield 2000: 164).

And so we move on to the next component part of the term: *assisted*. What is at issue here is the belief that a computer may well *assist* one in learning, though in itself is unable to *teach*. In point of fact, the vast majority of CALL activity takes place in the self-access language laboratory rather than in the classroom, where it is the student who is in control of the learning process. A computer can offer feedback and other help, but only when programmed to do so. By contrast, the teacher can explain, reformulate, cross-reference and provide *ad hoc* examples of specific language points, gauging his/her output by the learners' specific requirements.

As a final point at this stage, I wish to take issue with the assumption that CALL necessarily involves language *learning*. Although the myriad CD-ROM language courses currently available can be successful substitutes for 'non-virtual' ones, and a vast literature supports the claims that language acquisition is taking place, a brief glance at the exercise typologies used, whether they be quizzes or text comprehensions, confirms that their overall approach is more *test*-heavy than *text*-heavy. The exercises that tend to be favoured are those based on text manipulation which deal with only a few basic strategies: *gap-fill* or *insertion*, *deletion*, *selection* or *substitution* and *reordering*. These are thought to encourage the student in his/her learning by offering an environment in which language reception is combined with controlled production. Such exercise typologies are certainly not new to language teaching; as Johns and Lixun point out, the contribution of CALL has been to offer new variety in the

ways that these materials are presented, and have given teachers an added advantage in that, in the case of sentence shufflers and other re-ordering exercises, the little slips of paper that previously had to be gathered in at the close of every lesson can be eliminated (Johns and Lixun 1999: 330). But all too often we find that CALL becomes centered around what I refer to as *CALT* (the T refers to Testing). As I have just mentioned, the exercise types are generally based on quizzes, true-false or multiple choice questions, and cloze passages, all of which are formats that are typical of language *testing* procedures. As a general rule, questions in these exercises are constructed so as to have only one possible correct answer. This makes them uncomplicated as far as correction is concerned, and therefore ideal for autonomous learning, which has of course been the principal aim of CALL provision to date. However it does also mean that the language input contains only testable items. As a consequence, the creativity of the learner is rarely called upon, and the student is forced to follow fairly mechanical procedures. While this may suit some learner styles, namely the most field-dependent of students, it has the disadvantage of ignoring the requirements of others. The aim of this paper is to suggest ways in which CALL materials can be presented in a *learning* environment rather than in a *testing* environment.

III. CALL IN THE CLASSROOM

The diffusion of CALL has been further extended by the increasing presence of the Internet in our everyday lives. Computers, once a luxury, are now considered a relatively normal part of the classroom furniture, along with the blackboard and the cassette recorder. It has been inevitable, then, that the language classroom has progressed to the extent that computer-based activities are incorporated into normal lessons rather than being thought of as necessarily extra-curricular, superfluous activities. This occurs in three principal ways: as an integral part of the course, as a supplement to the formal course, and as an 'optional extra'.

When computers are integral to the classroom course, they are either on-line or have a vast quantity of stored reference data and CALL activites (mainly on CD-ROM). Generally though, when the use of the computer is integral to the course, the students are browsing on the Internet, either to find out specific information (for example, as preparation for a discussion or an essay, or for a reading, listening or video exercise), because they are working on a 'treasure-hunt', or because they are searching for reference materials to aid them in their classroom work (for example, the use of online dictionaries, thesauri and corpora). Students are therefore dealing with naturally-occurring text *in situ*, and the tasks that they have to carry out assume a fairly high degree of proficiency both in terms of their language ability and in their ability to deal with technological terminology and instructions.

If we look at the use of computers when they are supplementary to the course, and when they are 'thrown in for fun', we find ourselves in another dimension, so to speak. It is generally in these situations that students are encouraged to access the vast number of language learning sites, and to try out Internet CALL (I-CALL): and this is where something very peculiar happens. The formats that I-CALL exercises take are common to other Internet sites. There are multiple choice tests, free fill-in tests, and tests which have the answers hidden in pull-down boxes, drag-and-drop for text and images, hangman, crosswords. But they are not used in the way that the average Internet user might expect.

Anyone who habitually uses the Internet as a source of information or enjoyment will be familiar with pull-down boxes and fill-in spaces. These are used with all sorts of functions in mind; for example, an airline's site will provide a number of destinations from which to

select (pull-down box), and credit card purchases require a customer's personal details (free fill-in). The tools used here in an everyday, monolingual environment are the same as those used in the EFL exercises mentioned above, but with one principal difference: in the real world, every answer in a pull-down box, yes/no button or fill-in field is a possible answer. Where choices are offered for selection, every one of them is valid; where a fill-in box is provided, the text that the user types in is accepted as being correct, or at the very least, appropriate. In the I-CALL world, however, the student is not given a real choice, having to select the one and only correct answer. This is standard CALL procedure, of course, but it is incongruous in that a student who uses I-CALL is carrying out a task which is effectively *unrealistic* when compared to the habitual use of the formats mentioned. If the real-world use of such formats is familiar and functions well, why not adopt it into CALL? It provides an opportunity for the student to exercise his/her creativity in a context where choices are normally made. This is not such a new idea after all: behind most innovation there is something older which has inspired it, or been adapted to fit it, or indeed, whose shortcomings have necessitated it. The exercises presented in this paper are no exception. In both cases, an existing paper model provided the inspiration for an exercise which is now realised, and arguably improved, in hypertext. Yet unlike the vast majority of exercise types that exist, these ones exist in what can be defined as a minimal-testing environment, which has its main focus in matters of text substitution and creative completion.

IV. THE UNIVERSAL POSTCARD

The inspiration for developing the Multiple Answer exercise (c.f. Appendix 1a) was the 'Universal Holiday Postcard Machine', originally presented in Swann and Walter (1984: 75)[1] as an exercise in language creativity and controlled practice. In effect it is a slot-and-filler model which provides a text structure and a series of gaps, each of which corresponds to a language box where possible words or phrases are provided. The text type (holiday postcard) has been reduced to a basic schema, with structural and variable elements (see Table 1).

Dear [*noun*],
Well, here we are in [*town/city*]. [*description of weather*], and we are having a/an [*adjective*] time.
I am [*action*] [*preposition*] [*place*], writing postcards, drinking [*kinds of drinks*] and looking at {various nouns}. {name} is {action} and {names} are {action} [*preposition*] [*place*].
Tomorrow we are going to [*town/city*]. I'm sure it will be [*adjective*].
Wish you were here,
love,
[*name*]

Table 1: *Schema of the Universal Postcard Machine (c.f. Swann and Walter 1984)*

The student chooses one of the suggested filler items, or creates his/her own, and is thus able to produce a complete text.

This kind of exercise is clearly satisfying for the student, as not only does it have a high pragmatic value (a student learning English may well want to send a postcard to an English-

speaking correspondent), but also because a range of choices are already supplied in vocabulary boxes, so there is no need to remember unfamiliar words or their spellings. It also satisfies the teacher's desire to introduce variation into the language learning process, because the student is able to play around with different text combinations and work out for him/herself what kind of word or phrase can plausibly be used in each space. The importance of this is made clear when we consider the fact that not even those phrases which we consider to be fixed, such as idioms and other set formulae, are actually invariable (c.f. Sinclair 1991, Moon 1998, Philip forthcoming). Therefore, it can be argued that the more variation a student is exposed to, the better, as it is the perfect way to prepare him/her for using the L2 outside the classroom.

Although the learning environment created here is fairly passive, there is more to this exercise than the mere copying of words into the spaces provided. There is a degree of grammatical input; and it should be noted that the lexical choices are not really as free as they seem. For example, if the student writes that 'there is a hurricane' (one of the choices provided), then it is not very likely that s/he will be 'lying under a tree'. In other words, even though all the choices offered are grammatically possible, the exercise is in fact deceptively full of pitfalls as far as semantic coherence is concerned. It is precisely this 'bewildering variety and minimal coordination' which is openly criticised by Sinclair and Renouf (1988/1996: 77).

Despite these detractions, the idea of the postcard generator has great potential in CALL: a basic text structure can be learned while the student exercises basic text manipulation strategies (insertion and/or selection). Another text type with similar properties of structure and variation is the horoscope, and an exercise designed for university students will be used here to illustrate the steps taken to create such an exercise.

V. THE MULTIPLE-ANSWER HOROSCOPE GENERATOR

We saw in section 4 that behind the impression of flexibility that a slot-and-filler exercise portrays, dangers abound. Every choice made as the text progresses limits the viability of the other remaining choices. For the sake of coherence, then, every choice should be both grammatically and semantically possible when coselected with any of the other choices. This task is far more daunting than it might seem, as every combination has to be kept in mind when creating the next set of variable elements.[2] The final text has to be checked several times to ensure that it really is grammatically and semantically coherent all the way through.

In creating the Horoscope Generator, the first stage was to devise a schema, which was based on authentic text samples. This was done by building an *ad hoc* corpus (Pearson 2000) from horoscopes on the Internet, and analysing their structures. The corpus of around 15,000 words of running text included daily and monthly horoscopes for all twelve star signs from 4 different sources. The resulting schema is shown in Table 2.

[*star sign*] The Sun is in [*sign*] and the Moon is going from [*sign into successive sign*]. You will be [*character/mood*], and [*events to occurr*]. [*advice*] [*closing comment*]. On a scale of 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest), here are your levels for today: Love: [*number*] Work: [*number*] Communications: [*number*]

Table 2: Text structure with variable elements.

Apart from the fixed elements – star signs and numbers – clichés and proverbs were chosen for the selectable text in the pull-down boxes. These can be selected and reselected at will, creating all sorts of different combinations. The fact that horoscopes are typically riddled with clichés, commonplaces and proverbial expressions means that this exercise is an ideal way of introducing such phrases in a plausible and suitably light-hearted context. The student is actively encouraged to try several different combinations and thus create new versions of a single theme. The benefits of such a zero-testing environment are considerable, as the student can experiment and be creative without being fearful of making mistakes. New phrases and expressions are presented in the sort of context where they are likely to occur, and students are motivated in their learning as they are creating something of their own with the selections offered.

The zero-test Multiple Answer exercise is by no means limited to short texts such as postcards and horoscopes; some of its most useful application can be found in the preparation of longer texts in which alternative phraseology or terminology is presented in the pull-down boxes. It is not even essential that the options offered preserve the meaning of the original text. Changes can be slight, as for example in the use or avoidance of loaded or genre-specific terms, but in theory there is no reason why they cannot involve complete opposites. There is no fixed rule here as everything depends on the text and the teacher's pedagogical motives for choosing it. I would also like to add that although substitution and reformulation exercises are by no means new to language teaching, the benefits to be had in moving them into hypertext are considerable. Every change can be visualised immediately and in context; there is no need to re-write stretches of text because the changes are but a mouse-click away; and the various versions produced can be printed out and annotated if wished, allowing the student to keep a record of his/her work.

This rather lengthy account of the Multiple-Answer is intended to show why the element of variation is so important. The principle of demonstrating textual variation is extremely important, and it is one that textbooks often fail to address. The constraints of print mean that in a textbook, consistent choices have to be made even between such everyday words as 'someone' and 'somebody'. Although editorial choices are usually stated in the front matter of the Teacher's Book, the preference of one of the alternatives will inevitably colour the students' learning of the terms. Furthermore, it does not adequately reflect real language use. As Halliday reminds us:

> *Real linguistics is not about what is* not *possible; it is about what is possible. ... Specifically, what will interest us is the question of* choice*; and choice involves (i) what is possible, and (ii) within what is possible, what is more and less likely.* (Halliday 1992: 15) *(my emphasis)*

In order to be in a position to make linguistic choices, we must have some idea of what our options are. An awareness of language variability is extremely important for learners, but very is difficult to illustrate, and the matter is not really given much conscious thought by most native speakers because, in general, they seem to be far more conscious of choosing *meanings* than they are of selecting particular words or phrases (Philip 2000). Variation in language and provision for linguistic choice are two very delicate areas of language teaching; so delicate in fact that they are often expected to be acquired rather than taught. And yet virtually every text that exists consists of a structure with variable elements. The crux of the matter is that it is infinitely more fruitful to show how variation affects text by actually demonstrating it than by abstract discussion.

VI. THE PROGRESSIVE CLOZE

Cloze tests are old favourites in the teaching profession. There are several versions, rangi from the true version where every n^{th} word is omitted, through the transformation of verbs a stems, to the currently fashionable c-test, where the beginning of the missing word is p vided as a clue. They are all used in language testing, for two main reasons. The first is t they are a very good way of testing a student's overall language ability. The second reason that, as with the other exercise typologies mentioned in this paper, they are so construct as to have only one acceptable answer and so their correction raises few problems.

If the Multiple Answer encourages the choosing and rearranging of chunks of text, t next exercise type tackles a more active form of text creation. It is to all extents and p poses a cloze test, as words have to be inserted into gaps in a text, but it works in rever instead of starting out as a gapped text which has to be reconstructed, the Progress Cloze (c.f. Appendix 1b) starts off as a complete text which is studied for its informati and linguistic content.[3] The first page of this exercise contains a short text with so vocabulary notes as required. The student then moves through a series of pages in whi words from this text are systematically deleted. S/he must try to remember which wo were used in the original text without looking back,[4] the purpose being to recreate the t which was seen at the beginning of the exercise. The sequence of pages can either cont the deletions of the previous page plus new spaces (a useful tool when the structure be focused upon is as important as the lexical content), or change the focused items each ti (for vocabulary acquisition). Answers are corrected by the computer before the next pa is made available, and, depending on the software used to generate the exercise, acce able variations to the answers can be included as correct even if they differ from the or inal. The overall benefits of this approach are found in the fact that it combines short-te memory and existing knowledge of syntactic and semantic elements in a drill that is quite as boring as others of its kind.

Just as the Multiple Answer exercise can have a different function to that of the mu ple choice test, despite the structural similarities, so too the Progressive Cloze can occu different ground to that of other cloze exercises. As it works in reverse to its traditional co terpart, starting with the full text and gradually becoming more fragmented, the studen encouraged to isolate and focus upon phraseological chunks. What happens is that it enco ages students to switch from passive to active reading, focusing on detail and on the ide fication of language chunks whether semantic (in the form of extended collocations, phrases, and so on) or structural (Sinclair and Renouf 1991). It places emphasis on awareness of collocative norms, an ability which is characteristic of advancing L2 linguis competence.

One of the applications of the Progressive Cloze which I have already experimented w involved the creation of a beginner's module intended for self-access based on the Univer Postcard (c.f. section 4). This method led students from being utterly text-dependent to be autonomous through an alteration of exercise and automated correction, and the const reproposal of one text with an increasing number of gaps. By the end of the exerc sequence, the students were in a position to attempt the free writing of a postcard, compo along the same structural schema as the exercises. In other words, after having experime ed with the text structure and its variable elements, and having progressed through a se of cloze exercises, the students were given free rein to personalise the text structure and t create something of their own.

But the Progressive Cloze should not be seen as being limited to self-access CALL: in fact, fruitful group discussion arises as the students seek to remember which words have been deleted; and the fact that the students already know the answer makes for a more compelling activity than the run-of-the-mill cloze version.[5]

VII. CONCLUSION

There is absolutely no reason why advances in CALL should be restricted to increasing the sophistication of software and user interfaces. While it is true that the innovations made in these areas have had repercussions on the design and development of new learning materials and teaching strategies, the fact of the matter is that there has been very little innovation in the exercises themselves. The exercise typologies presented above have been created in an attempt to clarify the blurred distinction between language *practice* and language *tests* which is all too often encountered in CALL exercises, and to propose some alternative ways of presenting text-based materials. They prove that is it possible to overcome the limitations of print, not only in its physical form, but also its psychological effect on the structuring of language teaching and learning.

The use of Multiple Answer exercises means that students will no longer be presented with endless quantities of incorrect, inappropriate or unnatural language; the Progressive Cloze provides a controlled environment for learning how to tackle some aspects of language production. Although both need fine-tuning, they are already proving their worth in the language learning process.

I entitled this paper 'CALLing out for some changes', and the time has come to specify the changes that I believe are worth calling out for. The first is that we should learn to keep teaching and testing separate. CALL may well use the same general formats as tests do (multiple choice remaining a favourite), but the approaches adopted should be as different as their *raisons d'être*. By constantly bombarding language learners with 'choices' that are contextually inappropriate at best, 'learner-English' at worst, we are doing neither ourselves nor our students any favours. It is by constant reiteration of correct forms that learners eventually obtain a firm grasp of a language, not by the reinforcement of incorrect utterances that might indeed come more naturally to the speaker of a given L1. Such agrammatical forms can be useful in testing language knowledge, but I argue that their place in teaching should be limited to grammar notes, and that they should not be carried forward into the L2 learning environment.

The second point that I wish to stress is that we should try to use technology in ways that are familiar to our students. Rather than expect them to relate an apparently familiar interface to an unrelated language exercise, we should be looking at how to exploit that familiar interface for our own ends, which means looking beyond the surface similarity to the paper exercises that we know and love. Computers allow us to do things that are unthinkable with paper-based formats; the fact remains that most of these 'unthinkables' still need to be thought up. In presenting these exercises I hope to have shown how computers can become a truly integral element of the language learning process, and I suggest that it is high time that we took them out of the language laboratory and into the classroom, not as an 'optional extra' or 'just for fun', but as part and parcel of the teaching and learning process.

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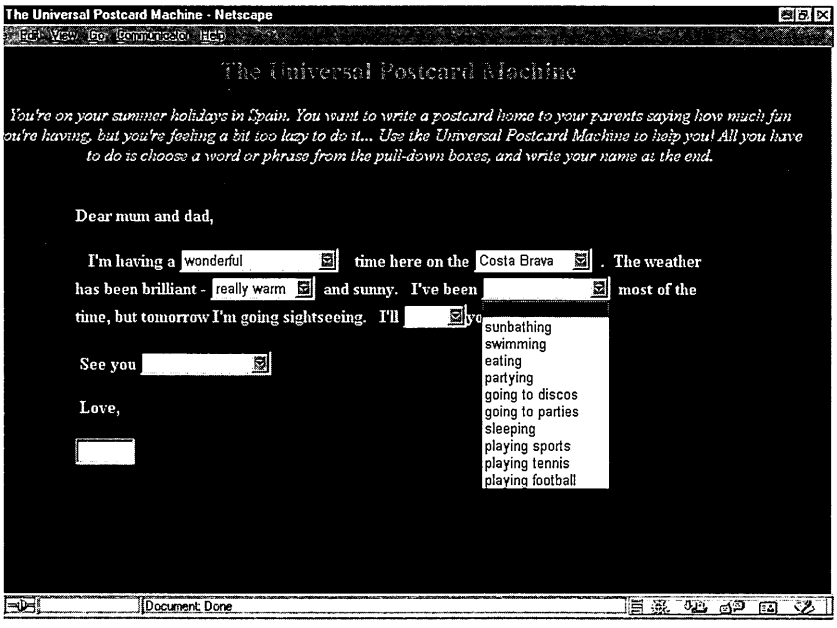
Appendix 1a

An example of a multiple-option pull-down exercise, created with Argosphere's TestMaker program www.argosphere.net/TestMaker:

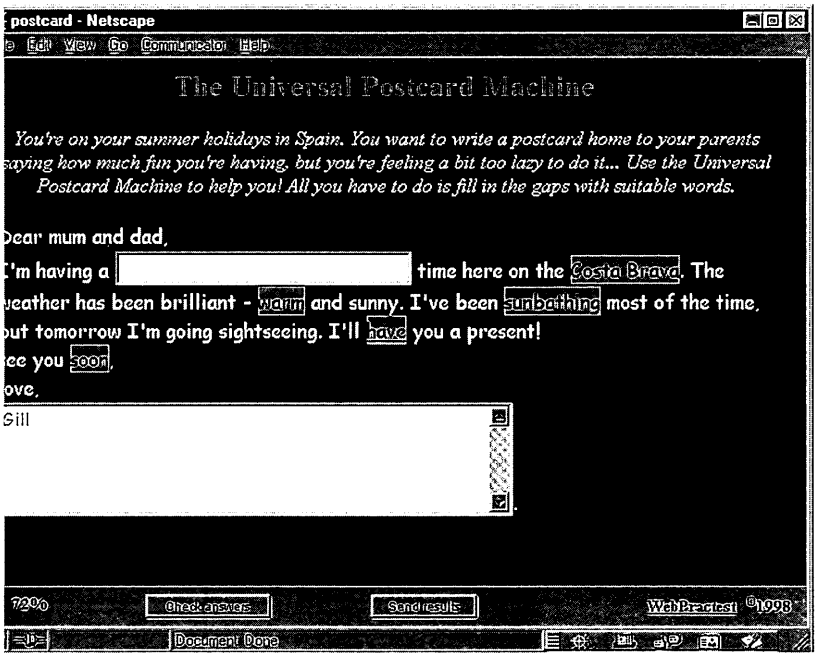


The program has been modified slightly to remove the correction and scoring functions, to reduce the number of slots from ten to seven, and to vary the number of options (normally limited to four) in each slot. This was achieved quite easily, and with very little technical know-how, by creating a schema from the provided templates, in which each 'question' slot was filled with the words 'THIS IS QUESTION 1, 2, 3' etc., and each answer slot with 'ANSWER 1a, 1b, 1c' etc. An examination of the resulting source code (visible in the Internet browser by selecting the command 'view source code') made it possible to adapt the original template.

The main benefit of exercises created from these templates is that they can be used off-line. Any correction and scoring is included in the file itself, rather than in an applet on an external server, meaning that the successful implementation of the exercise is not reliant on connection to a host site (which can be precarious, especially when an entire class attempts to connect to the same site at the same time).

Appendix 1b

Academic institutions in the USA are a prolific source of ready-made test templates and other computational tools for educational purposes. This example of a free fill-in exercise was created from the William and Mary College's 'Webpractest' template
www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/webpractest.



Although Argosphere's templates include two which make use of the the fill-in format, these do not allow for more than one acceptable answer to be considered correct. Webpractest's version, on the other hand, does allow for this, and it also boasts a fairly sophisticated correction procedure which colour-codes the students' answers: green for correct, underlined red for incorrect; and when the student clicks on the wrong answer to discover what s/he should have written, the correct answer appears in yellow.

The downside of this program is that the correction is done via an applet stored on the same site as the template, meaning that when Internet traffic is intense, answers arrive very slowly - if a connection can indeed be made. This problem is common to most sites providing templates and free hosting for tests. As a result, this template is perhaps less suitable for classroom use than for self-access or homework for those students (who are now in the majority) who have Internet access outside the classroom

NOTES

1 Reproduced in Crystal 1987, page 376.
2 Some figures are called for here: if an exercise contains five slots, each containing three choices, the total number of possible versions of the text is 35, i.e. 243. Ten slots, again with three choices in each (310), would produce a staggering 59, 049 versions.
3 This exercise, originally in a chalk-face format, was devised by Dave Willis and communicated to a group of postgraduate English language students at the University of Birmingham in September 2000: its application in a CALL environment is the current author's adaption of the general model proposed.
4 The page-back function is not disabled, as even if a student decides to go back and copy from the original, s/he will still have to make some kind of effort to memorise it.
5 By way of a postscript to this section, I should mention that this exercise is not limited to the CALL environment; the choice to use the computer or the chalkface depends on the kind of activity being proposed, its length, complexity and if, for instance, a final, printable copy is required at the end.

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