CALL Essentials: Principles and Practice in CALL Classrooms

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Publisher:	Alexandria, Virginia: TESOL

Pages	ISBN	Price
Pp. xi + 206	1931185158	$24.95 (member 19.95)
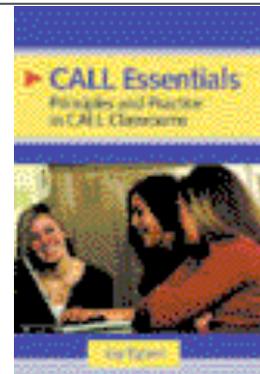
"Occasionally someone suggests that in future all teaching will be done by computers and that teachers will become redundant. These suggestions are more commonly advanced by those with little experience in teaching or computing. In my view, teachers are a basic requirement of a complex civilization; computers are tools. Good teachers have a responsibility to use the most advantageous tools available; for many tasks, a computer is a useful tool" (Lawler & Dry, 1998, p. 63). *CALL Essentials* shows it.

Joy Egbert prefaces her book by quoting a popular *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, in which the little boy Calvin poses a question to his father about the reason for all the fuss about computers. The aim of *CALL Essentials* is to show what the fuss should be about; indeed, what Joy Egbert provides is an accurate picture of what she has found to be essential to effective CALL (i.e. computer-assisted language learning) and how teachers and learners can benefit from it.

The eleven chapters of the book cover a variety of topics concerned with computer-assisted language learning that start from the theoretical definition, standards, and guidelines of CALL, and end up by being applicable to all languages, skill areas and contents. More specifically, chapter 1 introduces the principles of CALL by illustrating the conditions for optimal language learning, the standards for language teaching, the guidelines for using educational technology, and the way in which the learning

environment functions as a framework for CALL practice.

Chapters 2 and 3 show strategies to develop and practice reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Specifically, chapter 2 reflects on the benefit of using computers for reading and writing, and suggests techniques, guidelines, software, and web sites for developing students' reading, writing, and grammar mastery. Chapter 3, instead, takes into account listening and speaking mastery.

Chapters 4-6 explore benefits, techniques, opportunities, activities, frameworks, needs, and tools, respectively, for communication and collaboration, creativity and production, inquiry and problem solving.

Chapters 7-10 introduce content-based instruction, lessons, and software; guidelines and techniques for assessment; limitations, caveats, and challenges that can be encountered in the classroom; and the teacher development by considering the professional opportunities in CALL, the resources and tools for teachers and the importance of teacher inquiry to CALL practice.

The concluding chapter 11 presents the author's favorite CALL things. Particularly, it focuses on software programs and companies, hardware devices, web sites, activities, electronic resources, technologies, guidelines that the author has found particularly useful for computer-assisted language learning.

Since the book is addressed to those people who are actively engaged in teaching through technology, the main focus has been placed upon language learning, while technology has been backgrounded. Indeed, it underlines that, although technology is the key to CALL, "it is not just the technology or the language that is important, but a whole learning environment system that teachers can create with their students." In other words, the book emphasizes "language learning through technology" and suggests that educators should avoid being "technocentric in their thinking" (p. 4). In particular, *CALL Essentials* depicts the computer as a support, or medium, for language teaching and learning and not a substitute for the teacher.

Once such a basic view has been established, the main subject of *CALL Essentials* becomes the computer as a tool. Indeed, Egbert shows that using computer in teaching offers quick access to and manipulation of data, which can be presented in various lively and sophisticated formats. This introduces the second positive value of the book, namely, its richness of ideas, tools, examples, techniques, and guidelines for English language contexts that, with the help of technology, can be easily applied to any language, skill area, and context. It places particular emphasis on reading, writing, speaking, and listening, namely, the four basic areas of any language learning and teaching. As for the numerous useful web sites and software for the development of activities mentioned in the book, Egbert also illustrates how to evaluate them according to criteria related to the goals, presentation, appropriateness, and outcomes they offer.

Here is another positive aspect of the book I wish to underline: not only does the volume offer numerous overviews, supports, tips, activities, and tools, but it also does so in a clear and straightforward way. Indeed, it is handy and well structured: each chapter is characterized by a plain format that takes the reader by the hand when introduced to the multiple benefits, techniques, guidelines, and tools useful to develop CALL activities. Specifically, at the beginning of each chapter there is a scenario that illustrates the principles at work and quotations from research in field such as CALL, language acquisition, and educational technology; then, there are many tips to develop CALL activities and examples for English language contexts, although the ideas and principles can certainly be applied to any other language; and, finally, there is a section called "Teachers' Voices" which offers comments taken from CALL teacher education classes, e-mail conversations, and forums on critical reflection about using technology in language learning and teaching.

The "Teachers' Voices" sections together with the author's favorite CALL things certainly give a further value to the book; indeed, they enrich it with a particular touch of personal experience both from the author and those teachers who are personally involved in language teaching.

Furthermore, *CALL Essentials* emphasizes the necessity of grounding CALL pedagogy from a number of fields, especially applied linguistics, second language acquisition, psychology, and computer science. Indeed, before offering tips, examples and guidelines, Egbert briefly quotes research from the fields just mentioned. Of course, not only do such quotations provide a basis for what it is going to be presented, but they also help the reader track down previous study and offer the possibility of developing the reader's own knowledge.

Although it certainly offers an updated list of resources, The only disadvantage of the book is that, by being so strictly linked to software and web sites, it runs the risk of becoming outdated as quickly as a particular computer technology does. However, it is also true that Egbert does not mean to offer an updated list of CALL tools, but rather a view of the computer as a tool that may improve and facilitate language learning. In fact, when tools get old, ideas may remain valid. This certainly may also encourage the learner and teacher either to search or develop further and more updated software and web sites.

CALL Essentials offers a variety of ideas, tips, tools, examples, techniques, guidelines, and experience concerned with computer-assisted language learning. Such topics and experience are grounded on research and built on the idea that both the learning environment system and learning goals must be put ahead of technology. Both learners and teachers at all levels who need feedback and want to save time by learning how to use web and software can find CALL resources that cover various language modes, content areas, and student language levels.

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