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Computer Assisted Language Learning in Pakistan: Teachers' Perspectives

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Introduction

Pakistan has two official languages: Urdu and English. English enjoys the status of the elite class language and the language of the government sector whereas Urdu is the contact language among the whole nation. However, this scenario has always engendered a predicament of medium of instruction. This controversy has passed through different phases with significant shifts towards either Urdu or English in each phase. The whole emphasis of the political parties was on getting either of the two languages approved as “the only official language.” Consequently, both the Urdu and English languages lacked formal language training courses. In 1999, Ms. Zobia Jalal, as Federal Minister of Education, decided to include English as a second language from grade 1 to be taught as a compulsory subject in all provinces (Jalal, 2004). While widespread, English language teaching lacked innovation and expertise. Traditional teaching practices directly affected student performance. According to Abbas (1998), the pass percentage in English at secondary and college level classes was only 18 to 20 percent. This situation has not improved much in the past one and a half decades. The Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Gujranwala (a major city in the Punjab Province, Pakistan) released overall results for 2014 in English Compulsory subject as a 28.17 pass percentage for Part-1 Intermediate Exams and 45.30 for Part 2. This poor performance is the result of many factors, among which untrained English language teachers, outdated teaching techniques, stress on rote learning, crowded classrooms, poor planning while designing a syllabus, and lack of motivation on the part of teachers as well as students are obvious.

To address the above-mentioned problems, the use of computers can prove to be a modern solution. They offer three-fold benefits for language learning: inherent advantages of computers, advantages for teachers, and advantages for learners. Computers can powerfully handle a wider range of activities. Interactive learning accompanied with accuracy and spontaneity, impartialness and fairness, and accurate repetition of activities are some of the inherent benefits of computers. Online interaction fosters collaboration among students and teachers. Versatility in presenting teaching materials offered by Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) can animate the classroom atmosphere and increase the motivation level of students. Through using CALL applications, student learning opportunities and communication between teacher and student can also be accessed outside the classroom. Language learning outcomes can be positively influenced in terms of enhancing authentic input by providing opportunities to practice as well as arousing student’s motivation (Levy, 2009).

The present study examines teachers’ perspectives related to the use of CALL in Pakistan at the high

school level. Using a mixed methods approach, this study also aims to explore the perceptions and support provided to the teachers at the administrative level for the successful integration of CALL in language classrooms. The current research study addresses the following research questions;

1. What are high school English teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of CALL in their English classrooms?
2. How does institutional administration support the integration of CALL in teaching the English language?

Literature Review

CALL is defined as “the search for the study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (Davies et al., 2012). Ahmad (1985) argued that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, rapid developments in computer technology urged linguists and literary researchers to use computers which laid the foundation for using computers in language teaching and learning. CALL, as a term, came into favour in the 1980s, replacing CALI (Computer Assisted Language Instruction) which was a teacher-centred approach rather than a student-centred approach. CALL widened its scope by using the communicative approach in a range of new technologies. Now it includes highly interactive and communicative support for listening, speaking, reading and writing skills including extensive use of multimedia and Internet resources (Davies et al., 2012).

Warshauer and Healey (1998) pointed out that CALL had been divided into three main approaches. These approaches had different uses and perspectives. The first approach was behaviourist CALL, which was primarily used for grammar instruction or translation tests. Bulut (2010) mentioned that the behaviouristic use of CALL, which started in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly focused on students' behaviour and learning through drilling. The second approach, the communicative use of CALL, encouraged students to think about the appropriate use of form, which made it different from the behaviourist approach. The third approach, integrative CALL, focused more on using technology to encourage and enable the actual use of language.

Describing the uses of computers in language teaching, Soos (2010) argued that using computers could generate a project-based learning environment that enabled hands-on experience. This form of learning worked much better for many students than a teacher-directed, passive model of learning language. The use of CALL in project-based learning can encourage critical thinking for students and lead to greater educational knowledge. Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999) indicated the environmental friendliness of computers by saving paper. They had also mentioned the benefits of using computers for teachers by ensuring privacy and security of important records for the class.

Hubbard and Levy (2006) argued that a teacher must be able to understand the environment of the class, its limitations and opportunities for learning. Providing teachers with training on a regular basis can help them in learning and understanding the information without being distracted by too much information given at one time. Along with training teachers in different fields of CALL, it was necessary to teach them current teaching methodologies and approaches. Johnson and Kongrith (2007), too, stressed upon the role of classroom management which could yield negative results if CALL was poorly managed.

Looking at the teacher training programs in Pakistan, Davies and Iqbal (1997) pointed out that teacher training in Pakistan was highly stratified. Government Colleges of Elementary Education offered pre-service teacher training courses for primary and secondary school teachers. Those were usually one year programs offered after twelve or fourteen years of formal education. Despite pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, teachers continued to use traditional and conservative methods (Ali, 2000). This practice could be traced back to the theoretical content of teacher training programs where the content is delivered through simple lecture-based methods and trainees were not exposed to practicing new methodologies and teaching approaches during their training. That is why when they entered a real

classroom, they were unable to apply what they had learned.

The major obstacles in the way of CALL in Pakistan are a lack of communication networks, lack of computers compared to the number of students in the class, financial constraints, electrical power failure and outages, and a lack of teacher training courses in CALL. The government and the Ministry of Education support the use of CALL in the educational environment and aim to provide the educational institutions with as many facilities related to CALL as they can. Due to recent developments, many private schools have included computer education as a part of the curriculum. It is also being taught as an optional subject at the college level and can be mastered at the university level. Despite these major developments, Pakistani teachers lack proficiency in using computer resources in teaching English. Consequently, there is a major need for instruction and guidance. Mahmood et al (2013) stresses upon the lack of research in the field of CALL in Pakistan although a CALL subcommittee under English Language Reform was made operational by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and has been functioning since 2004. This subcommittee has trained 107 language teachers and 13 master trainers in Integrative CALL but couldn't do more due to a lack of funds. Mahmood et al (2013) also found that there was a lack of basic knowledge and understanding of CALL among teachers and emphasized increasing the number of trained teachers.

Ahmad (1985) argues that language teachers are not likely to be experts in the subject area, teaching skills, and computing skills from the beginning. Realizing the needs of their students, teachers are willing to learn the use of computers in the classroom if they are provided with appropriate training and practice in learning different CALL applications (Hubbard & Levy, 2006). The integration of CALL in daily lesson plans requires competence in the target language, instruction, and computing skills. It would be unfair to expect that a language teacher in a developing country like Pakistan could be skilled in all these fields without any proper training. The knowledge of how, why, and when to use computers in the classroom can lead language teachers towards locating and creating pedagogical activities to help their students towards better learning. Teachers tend to avoid using computers in their classes because they lack the knowledge to use them effectively (Johnson & Kongrith, 2007).

Significance of the Study

The present study is aimed at examining the attitudes and perceptions of English language teachers towards CALL training courses. Answers to questions such as whether teachers feel a need for such courses and how much they are motivated to get involved in CALL training courses will help the policy makers at the government level to develop policies for funding and the support of CALL training courses for teachers at all levels of education. It will also help to bring forth the issues, fears and expectations of teachers related to CALL training courses, which will support administration and CALL trainers to develop more effective CALL courses.

Methodology

To investigate the perceptions and attitude of teachers about CALL training courses a mixed methods approach was adopted. A questionnaire was administered to 40 in-service English teachers from the Punjab province and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 public and private high school principals. The questionnaire contained 26 items and took 14 minutes on average to complete. The participants were briefed about the study and asked for volunteer participation in the survey. The questionnaire had three main parts; the first part was focused on the background details of the participants. The second part of the questionnaire dealt with the current teaching practices of teachers in classrooms, the availability of ICT facilities and the general conditions of the classrooms. The third part mainly considered perceptions of the teachers about the effectiveness of CALL training courses and the

role of relevant authorities in arranging CALL training courses for teachers.

For conducting interviews, the principals were approached individually and informed about the study. The interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for the interviewees after receiving permission and focused mainly on the role of the authorities in providing ICT facilities within their institutes as well as arranging CALL training courses for the teachers. It took fifteen minutes on average to interview each subject. Interviews were later transcribed and coded by the researcher using NVivo.

Data Analysis and Results

The questionnaire data revealed that 90% of the teachers had access to personal computers with internet connectivity and used them for communication with friends and family, entertainment as well as accessing teaching materials online. The other most common digital device among teachers was smartphones. The majority of the teachers used computers at home (about 77%) and Facebook, Skype, Microsoft Office Word, Wikipedia and Google were among the most common online applications being used.

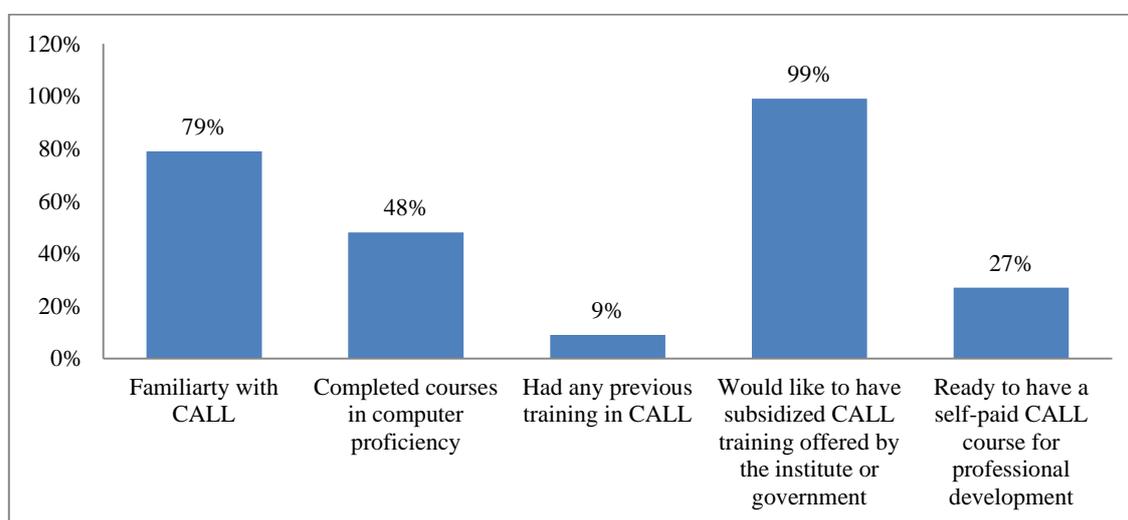


Figure 1: Teachers' responses to CALL courses.

The above-mentioned figure shows that in-service teachers were aware of CALL but only 9% of them had previous experience of CALL training. Furthermore, their computer proficiency was mainly based on self-learning; only 48% of the participants had completed a computer literacy course. Most the participants (81%) were aware of the importance of using technology especially computers in the class and were ready to use them in class. Almost all the participants (99%) mentioned that they would like to have a CALL training course offered by their institute or government with subsidized rates and a few of them were ready to take a self-paid CALL training course for individual professional development.

The results from interviews revealed that private institutions were in better condition. The private high schools each had a fully equipped computer lab along with at least one computer teacher, and one computer lab assistant. Every teacher had access to the computer lab but there was a very low percentage of teachers who used the computer lab for their classroom teaching. One of the main reasons for this low percentage of teachers was that teachers were usually hesitant to use the computer lab due to the time restrictions and concerns about electric power failure. Furthermore, since computers were only available in the computer lab, it was time consuming to take the students to the computer lab at the beginning of the class and then bring them back to the classroom at the end of the class time which had an adverse effect

on teaching time. This also paved the way for difficulties in classroom management and discipline. The other reason brought forth by the interviews was electric power failure as there were no set timings for power failure in Pakistan. Most institutions did possess some alternative power sources but they were not sufficient to run a fully equipped computer lab.

The results from the interviews revealed that teachers were willing to learn about CALL to improve their teaching practice. They were of the view that students enjoyed their computer lessons and would be more enthusiastic to have technology incorporated in their daily lessons. The high school principals reported that unfortunately there were no CALL courses being offered to school teachers in their institutions. In answer to the question “if there was any financial support available for teacher training courses”, the private high school principals mentioned that their institutions offered some financial support to the teachers only if the course was recommended by the higher administration of the institution. The public high school and college principals mentioned that funding could be available for such courses only if the courses were a part of refresher courses for teachers offered by the government. They further added that it was hard to get any funding from the government for some special courses for the individual professional development of teachers. All the interviewees expressed that they realized the importance of technology in this modern era and would like their teachers to be fully equipped with this knowledge.

Discussion and Conclusion

In analysing the results from the questionnaire and the interviews, a number of interesting points arose. First, it is apparent that teachers have access to computers and have the basic skills to operate a computer, although these facilities were available mostly at the personal level in teachers' homes and lesser so in their institutes. The second point was that teachers were willing to incorporate computers in their classrooms. It would intrinsically motivate the students to see their lessons being delivered through the use of technology, and teachers were also sure about an improvement in their teaching through practicing CALL techniques and tools.

Another important point emerged through this study was a need for training in teaching techniques along with the CALL technologies. Teachers realize that technology can do wonders only if it is delivered in the right way. The classroom management and timing issues raised by the director can be handled effectively by practicing good teaching techniques. The other issue about unscheduled electricity failure can be handled by having a plan B for every lesson. This plan B can be in the form of printouts of the activities, alternative activities, or keeping an extra lesson plan ready whenever using technology in the classroom.

To get maximum output out of language courses, the use of technology along with up-to-date teaching techniques is necessary. A teacher's awareness of “how, when, and where to use the specific teaching techniques and technology” can lead students to attain their learning goals successfully. In order to develop a productive CALL course, it might be necessary to divide the course according to the needs of the students. Since the requirements for English courses are different at the school, college, and university level, a related CALL course for every sector of teachers would better serve the needs and expectations of both students and teachers. To know the needs and expectations of each sector, a large population size for the needs analysis will be necessary. A survey of the administrative level of schools, colleges, and universities could provide more information on financial and technical support. Including the Ministry of Education of Pakistan in such a needs analysis would much better serve to bring forth the future of a CALL course in Pakistan.

By looking at the points discussed in this article and keeping in mind that CALL is a new field for Pakistani English language teachers at the high school level, results of the present study recommend that to get maximum interest and participation by the teachers in CALL training programs, the government and educational institutes must take the initiative and offer subsidized training programs. These programs

must also be tailored around general computer literacy skills, modern teaching methodologies and techniques so that teachers may get fully equipped with technical, technological and teaching skills. Furthermore, context related CALL materials must be produced so that when using computers for language teaching in classrooms, teachers don't have to worry about completing the syllabus in time. The incorporation of CALL materials in the existing syllabus can be a motivating incentive for teachers.

The Author

Shaista Rashid completed her MA in Language Teaching Specialization at the University of Oregon, USA as a Fulbright scholar. She has taught English to postgraduate and junior students for more than 5 years and is currently working in the field of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) with focus on investigating the impact of training in MALL on attitudes, beliefs, and practices of tertiary students in Pakistan.

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