

Integrating a CALL Initiative into a Regular Curriculum (in the Arab world)

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Introduction

As a teacher coming in to an existing college facility, I was looking for some way to add to the curriculum, to make my mark here. I found a typical text-based curriculum based on the American Headway Elementary series – Books 1 & 2 both student book and workbook. This was supplemented with a selection of listening texts and a few readers. There was a computer lab available for the students and in fact the college advertised a 1hr in 5 policy for the lab. It was not being put to much use as there were some serious maintenance problems evident. I decided to look into the lab. I wanted to work on oral skills, pronunciation, reading and speaking.

Kieran Egan (1986) has written on using the story-form to enhance teaching. New vocabulary, presented in a story, is more easily retained. Grammar, studied in context, becomes sensible. Word pronunciation, phrase recognition, intonation and other reading skills can all be assessed through the story form. It seemed logical to focus on the Unit stories contained in the Headway series. Stephen Krashen (1993) has also published extensively on the power of reading. “The most powerful tool available for building ... vocabulary and increasing the ability to read, write, spell and comprehend is *reading*.” Combining this with his ideas on language acquisition, I developed a CALL program which both fit the situation and followed these ideas.

The American Headway series has fourteen Units in each student text and each Unit has a main reading. I focused on these readings. They provide opportunity for vocabulary development, reading practice, grammar analysis, discussion, writing, and with the help of this initiative, listening and speaking. Some of the Unit stories were typed out and recorded. A question sheet was generated for each text with empty lines in place for answers. An MP3 program was installed in the lab and headphone-mic sets were provided. Students first studied the texts in class, then had a listening-reading-speaking session in the lab at the end of which they recorded themselves reading the text for two minutes. This was followed by a listening-reading-writing session (cloze exercise) with the main focus being to provide the students with the need to change focus from listening-reading to writing-spelling to scanning-to-match-aural-input-to-visual-input. It required considerable effort to stop the usual cheating (looking at the original text) and even more to get the students to skip some blanks and actually find their place by scanning the text, but perseverance paid off. Another classroom session allowed the students

to generate answers to the questions provided which were then asked, answered and recorded in the lab. These recordings form a permanent record of the oral ability of each student from beginning to end of the eight hundred hour program of studies they had entered. They form the basis for analysis of particular speech acts such as the correct pronunciation of vowels, consonant clusters, the “ed” past tense suffix, the “C&G rule and so many more aspects of speech that the list is too long to finish in only eight hundred hours. The plan was to extend the recording sessions to descriptions of pictures (that had been studied in the classroom for grammar or writing purposes) and eventually to record free speech conversations. With this in place, oral tests could then be recorded and become a part of the administrative record for each student. But of course it takes more than one attempt to successfully bring an initiative into full service.

Educational Context

The Facility

An Arabic all-male college in the United Arab Emirates seemed a great place to try teaching English as a foreign language. The college has about a hundred and fifty students attending at any one time. The buildings are air-conditioned and classes run earlier than in most locations in the world – 6:30 am to 1:30 pm daily – to avoid the heat and to fit into the regular daily rhythm of Arabic life – which includes an afternoon siesta. The English wing includes three computer labs with fifteen stand-alone student computers in each. Software available included Windows 2000, MSOffice 2000, the Winwida Authoring Suite, and a spelling program. I added a free downloadable trial version of MusicMatch to each computer individually.

The Students

The students are largely male Emiratis aged 18 – 21 with a few students from other GCC member countries and even a few from as far away as Jordan. Some graduated from military high-school and some from government (public) high-schools. The intake ability requirement was mid-beginner (on a world standard) with low-intermediate being the norm and high-intermediate being the top end of incoming student.

The Curriculum

In the existing curriculum, the students were using American “Headway” Books 1 & 2, both Student Text and Workbook, as the primary texts. One course of students – perhaps 80 – 90 students would be divided into six or seven classes of 10 – 15 students and seven teachers would

share the workload of fifteen to twenty-five classes per week. Each class was forty or forty five minutes long. The books were accompanied with cassette tapes and teachers were free to use other materials to supplement the course. This typically meant more listening exercises from books such as Listen Carefully, Basics in Listening, and Good News, Bad News. Teachers might divide the work such that one teacher for one class always worked in the Student Text, while the other worked in the Student Workbook, or one might cover reading and grammar while the other covered Writing and Speaking. Occasional movies were permitted and classes would double up for this. There were three CALL labs available and students spent one class in five working in the lab.

From the initial question of “How can I complement the teaching that is ongoing here now?” to formulating the initial idea described below took a month and another month to prepare. I had a brief two or three week introduction to the students followed by a month of work with no students – annual prep time during which teachers developed new materials for the college.

Linguistic differences between English and Arabic languages present truly difficult challenges for Arabic learners. They need to increase their discriminating abilities from a basic 6 vowel sound system to a 14 basic (actually 22) vowel sound system – the range for English (14 – 22) is the result of differences of opinion based on the degree of discrimination used to determine separate vowels from natural variation within the language. The existing curriculum addressed this need through the Listening component of the course, but relative to their vocabulary development, speech development was long overdue for attention. Word pairs like “want – went” became something in the middle orally, with the student hoping you understood which word he meant. But given sentences like “I’m hungry, I want a meal.” And “It was very far. I went a mile.” Students could not discriminate between the two word pairs “went-want” and “meal-mile.” This became my starting point. Something was needed that addressed the students’ ability to hear and discriminate better and to speak more clearly. Obviously the students did not need more new material added to their workload, I would have to work with the existing texts. A CALL program cried out for development.

Description of the CALL Initiative

As twenty-five classes were allocated per Unit, this meant that five CALL sessions were available per unit. Initially, two CALL sessions per unit were allocated to the initiative. Once it

was clear that the students approved of the program it was increased to four. The initiative first involved making digital recordings for some of the main Unit stories (each Headway Student Text has fourteen Units) and printing them out on A4 paper such that there was lots of extra space around the text for student notes. This copy was then used in the classroom where students did the usual “scan for unknown vocabulary,” (the use of the “highlighter” was strongly promoted for this) ‘read for initial understanding,” “discuss the unknown vocabulary and clarify meanings,” and finally read aloud for pronunciation practice and correction.” This was followed up within two or three classes with a CALL session where the students listened to a moderately paced reading of the story. They were encouraged to listen/read once or twice, then to listen/read/speak along with the reader two or three times before attempting to read it aloud alone. This final reading aloud was recorded. Students were instructed in the use of a free downloadable MP3 program – an early version of MusicMatch Jukebox – and they knew to limit their recording time to two minutes. At 64kbps this allowed a 25 second buffer before the file became too large to fit on a floppy disk.

These recordings were transferred to the teacher’s computer and were listened to carefully, initially only for effort and overall ability at the student level, and for “needs analysis” for future teaching topics. One such need was the rule for pronunciation of “-ed” when it follows a verb [“ed” say [t] when it follows a voiceless sound; [d] when it follows a voiced sound; and [ed] when it follows a “t” or a “d.” After teaching this rule, students would then be required to focus on this one rule for several text recording sessions, with marks assigned to correct production of “-ed.” Thus general speech practice became focused practice. The marking procedure for “ed” was quite simple – a sheet was prepared listing the “ed” words and as they occurred they were marked as correct, wrong, or missed with a comment on particular problems such as wrong pronunciation of “c,” [k] instead of [s] for example. Vowel contrast checks are just as straightforward. One rule-of-thumb which became clear was “don’t try to correct everything,” focus on one (or two) speech factors at a time. Slowly, slowly!

In addition to the text recording sessions, two follow-up classes were introduced . The first, a cloze exercise, required the students to fill in the blanks while listening to the story – with emphasis on changing focus from listening-reading to writing-spelling to scanning-to-match-the-oral-input-with-the-visual-input followed by more listening-reading – change focus to writing-spelling and repeat until all blanks are filled – usually taking three run-throughs of the story. The

second follow-up focused on asking and answering ten to fifteen questions about each story. Students worked in the classroom in pairs to come up with full sentence answers to these questions (prepared by the teacher when the stories were typed out initially). They then proceeded to do an interview-style recording session in their next CALL. They would alternate asking and answering questions, mimicking a free speaking session as much as possible (as opposed to “reading the answer). After a practice session or two in the lab, they would record two minutes of their performance. A ‘Marking time” of five minutes per student recording was allowed (only the most challenged students required this amount of time), which was less than the marking time for Writing classes. Occasional technical problems required second recording sessions, but as these were only two minute recordings, a student could easily do a make-up recording during any following CALL session.

The first ten recording sessions were used primarily to allow the students to become proficient in operating the software. After this, brief teacher-student review sessions were initiated during which time the student would read the teacher’s comments on their performance and the student’s recording was played and listened to by both, so that individual points could be confirmed, discussed and corrective work could begin.

Distinguishing Features

Administrative

This initiative was a one-teacher investigation into bringing a larger oral performance focus to the existing curriculum. Administration made it clear that they wanted oral performance to be the most important aspect of the program, but there was no effective means of maintaining records of this. In fact, oral exams formed part of the testing procedures – one hour tests were held every one hundred hours (two Units) – and every other one was an oral test. No records of these student performances were regularly made. This initiative brought recording sessions into the curriculum such that students were familiar with it from their CALL sessions, and created a permanent record of each student’s performance on an on-going basis. By simply designating specific sessions as “Test sessions,” the administration would have its permanent progressive oral record of student ability.

Curricular

One of the prime benefits of this initiative was to get students speaking English for extended periods of time (normally, in the classroom it was hard to get more than a brief

utterance from many students). In the typical classroom, a third to one half of the students would be disengaged from the lesson at any given time. In the CALL sessions, 100% of the students were engaged, 90% of the time. In fact, the students enjoyed the entire procedure so much that extra stories such as Don Byrne's "Basic Comprehension Passages" were brought in to the program and were treated in the same way. All the stories were subject to occasional use as objects of study for grammar or writing classes. The fact that the additional work brought more focus to the students' learning – rather than scattering their attentions elsewhere – is paramount. The students felt that they were involved in a worthwhile activity and so became more engaged with the program and so derived more benefit from their efforts.

Challenges

Administrative

The majority of EFL curriculums in the region are text based. This is first and foremost to accommodate record keeping regulations. But it is also simply the norm. This initiative involves an oral based curriculum – or at least it attempts to add an oral based aspect to the existing text based system. The administration were seeking a way to establish some kind of oral record of their student's abilities and this initiative explored that possibility.

Teaching

Of course there were teaching challenges related directly to introducing a new way of doing things into the system. Most of the students were eager to learn how to record themselves. They wanted to listen to themselves speaking English. This was not the challenge. But establishing the overall procedure took a longer time than was anticipated because the low-level students were very unfamiliar with computers, let alone recording software. I was asked how to move the cursor down a line by more than one student at the beginning of the course – and of course this was done non-verbally. Getting the attention of more than two or three students at any one time in the classroom was also a challenge as they put a great deal of effort into conferring with each other – in Arabic – on what was happening in the class. My interventions were often met with "teacher – he's asking about the thing we are doing now – he doesn't understand." And while some L1 conferring is good, too much is not – even at beginner levels. It was a challenge learning how to maintain records and name files and establish marking norms – but that was what I was there for – and it wasn't impossible. Accommodating bad disks, bad mics, bad computer hardware, etc. presented a much greater challenge. Eventually a system

needs to be developed which will allow the data to be stored in an Access database permitting individual student performances to be accessed (for all exercises) or individual exercises (for all students) to be viewed.

Student

The students had to learn how to operate a computer, how to operate MusicMatch Jukebox, how to contend with listening to themselves and then how to focus on their speech production. There were multiple challenges ongoing. There were no instances of student frustration leading to unruly behavior. There were no instances of refusal to co-operate, other than individual – “I’m tired today, teacher” excuses. The students’ responses to this initiative indicate that it was a positive experience overall. As evidence, there are recordings of students singing Nat King Cole’s “It’s a Wonderful World” (Unit 11) that would make any teacher smile.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation is for recordings to progress from being simply an element of the curriculum, to being a tool for personal reflection, for peer assessment, and for teachers to use for assessment purposes for the oral aspect of the program. That is, for the first fifty hours of instruction, the recording sessions are to be mainly about learning the basics – how to use the program (Musicmatch Jukebox), how to access pre-recorded files, how to name and save files to disc, and how to build an accumulative file for individual students. This also permits the construction of baseline data for each student. The next fifty hours would be used to let students listen to themselves – self assessment. Students would be asked to comment privately on their individual performances. The next one hundred hours of instruction would focus on peer assessment as students listen to themselves and others. Constructive comments are to be (anonymously?) communicated. Teachers can begin to extract an “Oral Mark Component” for progress test purposes. Over the next two hundred hours, recording sessions would be used by teachers, on an individual basis, as a vehicle for discussion between teacher and student. Students would be privately interviewed and assessed with real homework or remedial work assigned based on the recorded sessions. [This might include vowel contrast exercises, the “ed” rule, the “soft C & G” rule, how to say “aaarrrrr” rather than “re”, practice with consonant clusters, and more]. The teacher-student sessions are to be brief five minute interactions at first and gradually built up to 15 minute investigations of the student’s performance. Teachers should now be adept at reviewing and producing an “oral assessment’ for each student, based on

multiple teacher input. Over the final one hundred hours of the program, teachers would interact with each other, using the recordings as the focus for discussion. A portfolio of recordings, covering the entire program, would be used for this segment of the study. Each student would receive a final mark based on multiple teacher input. Each student should receive a CD of their recorded sessions for future reference, possibly with the teachers comments and recommendations also recorded.

Future Directions

This initial trial was done as a pilot project. Before it can be extended or brought in to the regular curriculum more permanently, either permissions will be needed from established text publishers to use their product in this way, or new materials will need to be created that do not require publisher's permissions. One of the greatest features of this initiative is that it is adaptable to almost any set of reading materials. I would like to see the CALL aspect of the curriculum brought forward significantly. The added involvement of the students in their lessons, the potential for reviewing oral performances and the maintenance of permanent oral records all speak to increasing the CALL time in the curriculum.

The next generation of this initiative will be to add a powerpoint version of the text (whatever text is used) to supplement the paper copy. One challenge that Arab students face is the switch-over from leftward reading to rightward reading. The incidence of dyslexic type mistakes that Arabic writers produce is very high. The moment they relax their vigilance words like "on" become "no" A favourite of mine is the spelling of the number "two." When asked how to spell this, the Arabic speaker will reply, "T W O. But when asked to write it, will write the T, then write the W (but leftwards rather than rightwards, and following this will write the O (between the T and W, as a follow on to producing the W backwards.) A remarkable bit of L1 interference! The reason for the Powerpoint presentation is that large letters can be produced on screen (easy to see) and they can be made to appear slowly from left to right across the screen – providing a guide for the eyes to follow. As the voice follows the words as they appear, the Arabic reader cannot get lost. Whereas with an entire page of English text in front of him/her, once the train is lost, it may never be found again. This has to have a positive effect, logically – but needs to be studied for proper data to be produced..

Another aspect of the next generation would be the expansion of the materials to include picture descriptions – show a picture on the screen – have the student "talk about" the picture –

thus eliciting “free speech” as opposed to reading from a written text. This was an intended part of the initiative, but the limitations of time, facilities and student abilities prohibited the inclusion of this aspect of the initial idea in the first trial. This would then logically be expanded to include two students discussing a picture, a student explaining something about a picture, or arguing for or against something in a picture. Certainly expanding the on-screen oral reading opportunities would be a worthwhile effort.

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