Integrating CALL into an Iranian EAP course: constraints and affordances

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Abstract. Iranian universities have recently displayed a growing interest in integrating Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) into teaching/learning English. The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context, however, is not keeping pace with the current changes since EAP courses are strictly text-based and exam-oriented, and little research has thus far been conducted on using computers in EAP classes. Hence, this study was conducted to explore CALL experiences of an EAP class in an Iranian university while focusing upon the participants' attitudes toward CALL, the constraints and affordances of CALL integration in EAP, and its effectiveness in enhancing language skills "in a low-resource setting". To this aim, 25 undergraduate students, their instructor, and a teaching assistant participated in this study. Several instruments were employed to collect data quantitatively and qualitatively. The outcomes of these e-experiences were also analyzed. The findings revealed that the participants generally held positive attitudes toward implementing CALL. They also believed that incorporating CALL into the classroom contributed to the improvement of English language skills. Yet, some challenges emerged in terms of the following barriers in using CALL within EAP courses: infrastructural, institutional, technological, pedagogical, psychological/personal, and sociocultural/political. Finally, several potential solutions were suggested to ameliorate the opportunities and minimize the costs of CALL in the Iranian context.

Keywords: CALL, EAP, affordances, constraints.

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1.   Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in integrating CALL into English education among Iranian universities. However, as Atai and Dashtestani (2013) remark, the rigidly text-centered and exam-oriented nature of the EAP courses in Iran has not allowed for CALL integration. This research area has thus remained mostly unexplored.

Within the Iranian EAP context, there is a gap in exploring the use of technology in EAP courses and evaluating stakeholders' attitudes toward it. In an attempt to bridge this gap, the present action-research study was carried out to explore CALL experiences of an EAP class in an Iranian university with the focus on the participants' attitudes toward CALL, the constraints and affordances of CALL integration in EAP, and its effectiveness in enhancing language skills "in a low-resource setting".

2.   Method

Twenty five female undergraduate students, their instructor, and a teaching assistant participated in this study. Several instruments, including questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, non-participant observations, and diary entries were employed to collect data quantitatively and qualitatively. The outcomes of these e-experiences (e.g. blog entries, peer e-comments, and e-feedback) were also analyzed so as to provide a clearer picture of the interactions which occur when digital technologies are integrated into an EAP program.

A five-part questionnaire was used to explore learners' attitudes toward CALL. The first three parts were developed by Aryadoust, Mehran, and Alizadeh (2015). The last part of the questionnaire was designed by Lee (2010) and translated into Persian (back-translation was done to verify the accuracy of the items).

Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data (e.g. research log, interviews, e-comments, open-ended questions in the questionnaire), and SPSS version 21 was utilized for the analysis of the quantitative data (i.e. the questionnaire items).

3.   Results and discussion

As Table 1 shows, the findings revealed that the learners generally held positive attitudes toward implementing CALL. They stated that incorporating CALL

into the classroom contributed to their improvement of English language skills (particularly in reading and writing). The learners felt motivated and engaged, because they had a broader audience with which they could share their experiences. As students of Theology, they felt that they could propagate their religious ideology throughout the world. The learners also felt self-confident as a result of their active presence in the virtual world. They believed that their e-experiences were geared toward enhancing team work and collaboration, using up-to-date materials, improving computer literacy and skills, augmenting general knowledge, adding further appeal, and offering variety in the classroom. Furthermore, technology integration was found to have created a stress-free environment for the participants.

Table 1. Some questionnaire items measuring learners' attitudes toward the integration of CALL in EAP courses

Item	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly disagree %
Computer is a useful tool for developing reading skills.	0.0	0.0	48.0	52.0
Computer is a useful tool for developing writing skills.	0.0	8.0	52.0	36.0
I like learning a new language by computer.	4.0	12.0	60.0	24.0
Using computer tools to learn English is a great advantage over traditional methods.	0.0	0.0	48.0	52.0
CALL is a stress-free environment to learn English.	0.0	0.0	56.0	44.0
Using a computer makes language lessons more interesting to me.	0.0	4.0	24.0	72.0
I had a positive experience with the blog project.	0.0	0.0	24.0	72.0
I benefited from writing and reading blog postings.	0.0	0.0	28.0	72.0
Blogging for a broad audience was more appealing than writing for a sole instructor.	0.0	16.0	16.0	68.0
My English has improved as a result of regularly using personal blogs.	0.0	8.0	52.0	40.0

The instructor and the teaching assistant also had positive attitudes toward CALL integration since it promotes more collaboration among the learners, increases the sense of achievement (especially when computer literacy and skills get improved), and enables purposeful English learning.

Yet, from the perspective of both the teacher and the learners, some obstacles emerged in terms of the following barriers in using CALL within EAP courses: *infrastructural* (e.g. lack of formal plans, policies and processes, insufficient funding resources, lack of investment and financial support), *institutional* (e.g. lack of organizational and administrative support, lack of professional development and training), *technological* (e.g. lack of equipment, facilities and resources, lack of IT support, outdated hardware, lack of appropriate software, slow internet connectivity, lack of ubiquitous access to technology, students' low digital literacy, technical difficulties), *pedagogical* (e.g. inauthentic interaction, shortage of time, faculty workloads, curricular restrictions), *psychological/personal* (e.g. lack of confidence, lack of motivation, technophobia, student

anxiety), and *sociocultural/political* (e.g. the Internet filtering, security issues, copyright regulations, hegemonies of CALL).

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the EAP practitioners, in general, have positive attitudes toward CALL, which indicates promise for the application of technology in EAP courses. This finding is in line with many studies, namely, Atai and Dashtestani (2013) and Dashtestani (2012). Positive attitudes of teachers and learners can lead to a more successful implementation of CALL in the Iranian context. It behoves us to bear in mind that positive attitude is a logically necessary condition yet definitely not sufficient for successful integration of CALL. In accord with the findings of Atai and Dashtestani (2013), Maftoon and Shahini (2012), and Dashtestani (2012), this study also reveals that there are a set of constraints as discussed before which, if not addressed properly, would lead to discouragement and may result in a future change of attitude.

4. Conclusions

To implement CALL successfully in Iran, a fundamental change is called for. This requires the governors and policy makers to provide additional funding since a key barrier to technology integration is the lack of facilities. Moreover, regardless of political reservations, broadband Internet access should be regulated as a utility at least within academic settings. If such constraints and barriers are not eliminated, the positive attitudes of English as a Foreign Language learners and teachers toward CALL might be negatively affected in future. Also, more attention should be directed toward teacher education (for both pre-service and in-service teachers) as well as learner training, since it is not plausible to assume that teachers and learners have the skills required to use and implement technological tools and services most effectively in their teaching and learning processes. In Iran, there is a dearth of CALL teacher education courses. CALL as a mandatory credit course has not yet been established in Teaching English as a Foreign Language programs at Iranian universities. The few existing CALL courses slightly touch upon the issues of technology integration into language education. Yet, they do not teach how to use educational technology through using technology due to the lack of digital facilities. In summary, the participants of this study overall perceived that the application of CALL in EAP created a motivating, collaborative environment which successfully responded to their needs. Such a positive attitude necessitates the improvement of the status quo regarding the use of technology in the Iranian context as "a low-tech setting", and the necessary infrastructures for CALL should be put in place as soon as possible.

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