

Learners' perceptions of a reading section without instruction

Alessandra Belletti Figueira Mulling¹

Abstract. This study highlights learners' perceptions about their experience with self-access materials with a qualitative orientation as the best way to understand nuances of how students learn and what they need from learning materials. This paper presents English as a foreign language learners' attitudes when interacting with the computer-reading section *Catching a Glimpse* (CaG) – which consists of texts written for pedagogic purposes accompanied by a bilingual glossary, an audio version of the text, and a text illustration. Learners' perceived experience with CaG was addressed through stimulated recall in semi-structured interviews with 24 participants who commented on and explained how and why they interacted with CaG. Furthermore, respondents shared their impressions of the fact that there was no initial or follow-up question instructing learners on what to do. The findings suggest the absence of instruction or set goals fostered an authentic interaction with the texts, however, CaG's instructional design does not properly benefit from computer-assisted language learning technology.

Keywords: self-access, learners' impressions, reading without instruction, qualitative data.

1. Introduction

This paper is a fraction of the on-going evaluation of the digitally delivered and self-access English learning material English M1, developed by the Brazilian Ministry to students and members of staff at beginner level of English in vocational schools. The material comprises 18 lessons, each ending with the reading section CaG.

1. University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, United Kingdom; alessandra.mulling@port.ac.uk

How to cite this article: Belletti Figueira Mulling, A. (2017). Learners' perceptions of a reading section without instruction. In K. Borthwick, L. Bradley & S. Thoušný (Eds), *CALL in a climate of change: adapting to turbulent global conditions – short papers from EUROCALL 2017* (pp. 35-39). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.eurocall2017.685>

CaG has no instruction or follow-up activity and learners are given no specific goal to guide them on how to interact with it. All texts were written for pedagogic purposes and contain a maximum of 600 words. Texts are accompanied by (1) a bilingual (English-Portuguese) glossary; (2) a user-activated audio version of the text, and (3) a text illustration.

By giving voice to learners' often-overlooked opinions (Conole, 2008; Levy, 2016), this paper focusses on their perceived experience and their own approach to engage with CaG.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twenty-four users of the material participated in face-to-face interviews. They were 14 school staff-members (adult learners) and ten secondary-level students. All participants but one expressed they had previously studied English.

2.2. Data collection and instrument

Participants were prompted to interact with two previously selected CaG sections on a computer screen as a way of recalling their original experiences and impressions about the reading section. This was also an opportunity to build a rapport so learners would feel at ease to share their opinion.

Stimulated recall was combined with recorded semi-structured interviews in learners' L1 (Portuguese) in order to investigate detailed information about learner's perceived benefits in reading the texts and how they interacted with CaG as a whole. For instance, with the intent of capturing learners' chosen approach, participants were asked to describe their steps for interaction with CaG (e.g. whether they started reading straight away, or first observed the illustration, the glossary, or played the audio) and share their opinion on the reasons why they approached CaG the way they did.

For a more efficient coding management system during the analytical process of the qualitative data, the software Nvivo was employed. Nvivo allows the researcher to trace codes in a transparent way, increasing integrity and coherence when interpreting data across participants and within an individual. After looking

for patterns, categories emerged based on frequencies, such as learners' positive claims about the absence of an instruction and a follow-up activity related to the text.

3. Results and discussion

Despite being digitally delivered, an analysis (see [McGrath, 2002](#) for a difference between analysis and evaluation) of CaG suggests it makes little use of the interactivity, the usability, and the functionality supported by digital tools and usually regarded as one of the advantages in using computer technologies for language learning ([Chapelle, 2003](#); [Dziemianko, 2012](#)).

Participants' reports regarding their experience with the glossary confirmed such suggestions. Even though learners said they used the glossary when reading the texts, critical comments revealed its benefits were limited, as it did not contain all the words needed. Learners mentioned using Google or electronic dictionaries owing to a more comprehensive number of word entries. For instance, Participant 16 kept an electronic dictionary open on his computer screen and Participant 2 preferred accessing the vocabulary lists previously presented in the material because they contained word visuals and examples of the word in use. Also, three participants described the glossaries as a threshold level type of words-list they were allowed to not know the meaning, implying they should know the others not in the list. This reveals the potentially negative impact of glossaries, as learners might feel frustrated if led into believing their lexical knowledge is below expected.

The audio tool is the one feature in CaG that capitalizes on computer technology to support a multi-media experience for learners. However, only four respondents used the tool, all for the same reason: checking words pronunciation. Learners made no reference to using the audio for listening comprehension purposes. Participant 6 said it disrupted her trying to make sense of the text because "the audio came before my line of thought and interrupted it [...] it mixed my understanding of the text with my understanding of pronunciation".

Despite respondents' perceptions of the glossary and the audio tool as not especially useful in supporting reading and comprehension, data suggested they were interested in the texts. Learners reported that the absence of instruction or follow-up activity generated a relaxed attitude towards the texts and freedom to act independently under relaxed conditions. For instance, Participant 2 compared CaG readings to when she reads in the L1. Nine respondents described CaG as an

“entertainment” (Participant 2), because the section did not present new linguistic content.

In this sense, data analysis revealed learners focused on text meaning. Participants (e.g. 7) shared how after an extensive lesson with rules and learning activities, reading about culture-related content felt good. Participant 10 explained how he felt about CaG:

“I finished everything about this lesson, now I will relax a little bit reading this text [...] I had already done the activities, everything was ready, before moving on I read the text”.

Another indication of focus on meaning is learners’ examples of how some of the information read in the texts is useful for their lives. For instance, Participant 26, a Spanish teacher, was pleased to read about Thanksgiving as she found it interesting to compare with her knowledge about celebrations in Spanish speaking countries.

The illustration also encouraged focus on meaning. Four respondents said they used the visual input to confirm whether their comprehension of the text was plausible. They did not observe the illustration before, but during and after reading. They also explained that observing the image before reading could lead them into plausible interpretation of the image but incoherent with the text.

4. Conclusions

When it comes to self-access materials, giving voice to learners through qualitative analysis of data can reveal impressions that are very particular to learners’ experience (Bahumaid, 2008; Ellis, 1997; McGrath, 2002). This study presented learners’ opinion about a reading section that had no instruction or demanded outcome and their approach to interacting with it.

Learners’ positive impressions support Masuhara’s (2013) claims that follow-up comprehension questions or keeping linguistic outcomes in mind might lead students to feel apprehensive about reading. This study extends Masuhara’s (2013) assertion proposing learners have also enjoyed not being given a reason to read the texts, which allowed them to be creative in their approach.

Undeterred by the few advantages taken from its digital delivery, which could have provided better learning experience through, e.g. a multimedia glossary,

participants reported experience with CaG was positive. This study concludes that not having an instruction conferred a sense of authenticity to reading, as learners were the ones who ultimately decided whether to read or not, the extent to which they committed to comprehending, and most importantly, how they approached the texts (like whether they used online support, or listened to the audio before, during, or after reading). Furthermore, the absence of a demanded linguistic outcome led learners' attention to the meaning of the language in the texts, one of Chapelle's (2001) criteria for CALL task appropriateness.

Further research in the field should address the extent to which focus on meaning is a corollary effect of reading without instruction or a demanded linguistic outcome in self-access materials for beginners and how these conditions affect learners' efforts to comprehend.

References

- Bahumaid, S. (2008). TEFL materials evaluation: a teacher's perspective. *Poznan Studies in Contemporary Linguistics*, 44(4), 423-32. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10010-008-0021-z>
- Chapelle, C. A. (2001). *Computer applications in second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524681>
- Chapelle, C. A. (2003). *English language learning & technology: lectures on applied linguistics in the age of information and communication technology*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/llt.7>
- Conole, G. (2008). Listening to the learner voice: the ever changing landscape of technology use for language students. *ReCALL*, 20(2), 124-140. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344008000220>
- Dziemianko, A. (2012). On the use(fullness) of paper and electronic dictionaries. In S. Granger & M. Paquot (Eds), *Electronic Lexicography* (pp. 319-342). Oxford Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654864.003.0015>
- Ellis, R. (1997). The empirical evaluation of language teaching materials. *ELT Journal*, 51(1), 36-42. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/51.1.36>
- Levy, M. (2016). The role of qualitative approaches to research in CALL contexts: closing in on the learner's experience. *Calico Journal* 32(3), 554-568. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.v32i3.26620>
- Masuhara, H. (2013). Materials for developing reading skills. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (pp. 365-390). Bloomsbury.
- McGrath, I. (2002). *Materials evaluation and design for language teaching*. Edinburgh University Press.

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2017 by Editors (collective work)
© 2017 by Authors (individual work)

CALL in a climate of change: adapting to turbulent global conditions – short papers from EUROCALL 2017
Edited by Kate Borthwick, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thoušny

Rights: This volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; individual articles may have a different licence. Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.eurocall2017.9782490057047>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net

Cover design based on © Josef Brett's, Multimedia Developer, Digital Learning, <http://www.eurocall2017.uk/>, reproduced with kind permissions from the copyright holder.

Cover layout by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Photo "frog" on cover by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-04-7 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-05-4 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-03-0 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2017.