

Integrating CALL into Language Teaching : Implementing WBLL technique to teach English language to EFL learners in a secondary school in Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

The rapid advance in technological tools and their expansiveness, has made their impact on different aspects of life undeniable. Education has also been a field in which technology has found a fertile ground to grow. Technology has made education much easier for both teachers and learners and provided a more autonomous and amusing ambience for language learners. This paper demonstrates the relation between Computer Assisted Language Learning tools and language acquisition and learning. It also tries to incorporate technological tools into language teaching process via designing a lesson in which EFL language learners are encouraged to make use of technological tools and Web in particular in order to perform their linguistic tasks and exercises.

Keywords: CALL, SLA theories, language learning, WBLL

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, world has witnessed a dramatic change in the ways people work and interact in the society due to the rapid development of various aspects of communication and information technologies. This has posed new duties and challenges to modern teachers. English language teaching tradition has drastically been changed with the emergence of technology and integrating its elements into education process. Technology or CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has facilitated language learning through satisfying auditory and visual senses of students in the classroom.

It is obvious that a successful learning highly depends on the students' desire to participate and the level of their engagement in the lesson in classroom. To fulfill this, CALL can significantly be helpful as it can provide suitable context, authentic settings and interactive tasks and activities which can meet students various linguistic and communicative needs in learning a foreign language. It can also make teaching/learning process more interesting and effective as well as productive in terms of improvements.

2. Relation between CALL, SLA theories, and language learning

Levy (1997 p.1) defines CALL as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning". On the other hand, Beatty (2003 p.7-8) posits that CALL encompasses " issues of materials design, technologies, pedagogical theories and modes of instruction. Materials for CALL can include those which are purpose-made for language learning and those which adapt existing computer-based materials, video and other materials".

While the first view prioritises the application of the computer in its information structure, the second proposition in addition to prioritising learning the language, extends to various possible connections between computer technologies and language learning.

CALL adopts various ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) approaches and applications to teaching and learning a foreign language from traditional "drill-and -practice" programs devised and used in 1960s and 1970s to the modern manifestations like web-based distance learning and virtual learning environment. Moreover, it includes CMC (Computer Mediated Communication), interactive whiteboards, MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) and Corpora and Concordances (Lamy & Hampel 2007).

The current philosophy of CALL strongly emphasises on the student-centred materials which facilitate self-learning by learners. These materials mainly carry two features; individualised learning and interactive learning. However CALL in essence is a tool to help teachers facilitate language learning, it

can also be used as a curative instrument to help those students who need additional support or to reinforce what has already been learned in the classroom.

Designing CALL materials generally considers language learning methodology and principles which are inferred from different language learning theories such as 'cognitive', 'constructivist', 'behaviourism', 'monitor hypothesis', 'natural order' and so on. Below some of the main SLA theories, which CALL has mainly adopted, are explained:

- **Behaviorism**

This theory was proposed by Skinner (1957) in which he stated that a language is acquired through stimulus-response mechanism. The characteristics of this theory were imitation, practice, reinforcement and habit formation. Skinner's ideas were used to design and create computer applications for language learning. CALL applications in behaviorist perspective of language learning attempt to reinforce responses to learners through, for example, using images, texts, and CALL activities as well as providing a system to score learners' results (Beatty 2003).

- **Nativism**

This was another theory introduced by Chomsky in 1976. In his cognitive theory, Chomsky showed the interest in nature of the language and stated that language is like a mirror which reflects mind. He also believed that humans are talented with an innate acquisition device (LAD) which is responsible for initial stages of language development. In his viewpoint, learning a new language and its grammatical rules (Universal Grammar) was much the same as learning of the mother tongue and the only significant thing was to observe how to lay parameters for the new language.

- **Functionalism**

Krashen (1981) introduced this language-related theory. He believed that language is the reflection of affective and cognitive capabilities of a person and that social interaction constructs functional levels of language. This theory was a collection of several hypotheses:

- *Acquisition-learning hypothesis*
- *Monitor hypothesis*
- *Input hypothesis*
- *Affective filter*
- *Natural order hypothesis*

He differentiated between learning a language and acquisition of a language. He explained that acquisition is a subconscious process and learners feel that a sentence or a statement is grammatically correct or wrong even if they are not conscious about what rule is violated. Whereas learning is a conscious process and learners are aware of grammatical rules of the target language. Moreover, they can explain the wrongness or correctness of a sentence based on the grammatical rules that they have been taught. Regarding language acquisition, he stressed on exposing learners to natural language communication and meaningful interaction to express meaning and grasp rules rather than being taught in an instructive systematic manner.

In monitoring hypothesis, he asserted that there is a coordination between language acquisition and language learning systems. When an utterance is initiated by acquisition system, the learning system 'monitors' it to analyze and correct the errors.

In input hypothesis, Krashen (1985) mentions the mechanism of moving learners from one stage to another and claims that a language is acquired whenever learners comprehend the message. They notice that there is a gap that they need to fill it. This necessitates learners' affective and effective engagement with the materials by providing a real, authentic context for communication and encouraging them to interact meanwhile being aware of their needs and their different learning styles. Promotion in this stage will be granted when the learner can understand the message which contains structure(s) 'a little beyond' his/her current stage. He also said that just comprehensible input itself is not enough to understand the message but also there are affective factors that can affect learners' preparation to grasp the message. A low anxiety and a high level of motivation and self-confidence can boost SLA.

In natural order hypothesis, Krashen ;furthermore, proposes that certain grammatical structures are acquired earlier than others. For instance, the progressive maker '*-ing*' and plural marker '*s*' morphemes are acquired earlier than third person singular '*s*' and possessive '*s*' morphemes.

- **Socio-Culturalism**

Socio-cultural theory was another theory which tackled SLA issues. It was founded by Vygostky (1962) and developed by other researchers. This theory suggests that learning occurs in social contexts via collaboration and interaction. In socio-cultural view, learning is an inter-mental and social activity which occurs in Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is defined as the difference between the child's independent achievement and his/her achievement when provided with adult assistance. Donato (2000) argues that social interactions can shape learners' linguistic and cognitive development.

SLA theories contributed to our understanding of how languages are acquired, learned, taught and how the learning/teaching materials can be developed to have a more productive effect. There have been efforts to integrate and make use of SLA theories in CALL (Doughty & Long 2003). For instance, Behaviourism lead to appearance of audio-lingual methods of learning a language. These methods focused on the mastery of form and structure of the target language via mimicry and memorisation. These methods emerged with the idea that repeating exercises and drilling-listening enhance language learning. Technology (language lab.) provided learners with an opportunity to listen and repeat different isolated unites and structures of the target language in order to learn (Fitzpatrick & Davies 2003). Also certain types of computer-based-learning tasks(known as courseware) were designed. These designed tasks were self-contained programs like drills, games, tutorials and simulations that were resemblance of stimulus-response patterns. Additionally, Computer worked as a mechanical tutor that provided the learners with positive or negative feedback about the accuracy of their responses.(Kern & Warschauer 2000).

Socio-cognitive theories lead the CALL to create the language tasks that encourage learners to use their previous knowledge to face the information accessed and then change this knowledge into a learning experience in order to be practised outside the classroom. Thus, meaning is socially and individually conceptualised and learning process happens in a social, interactive way in which both learners(groups, peers) and teacher play an active role.

Functionalism theory resulted in appearance of communicative CALL which accentuates on meaningful and functional use of language. Language tasks concentrate on the communicative aspect.In other words, learners use the language first and then begin the mastery of grammatical structures .Some communicative CALL software were developed for this purpose such as text reconstruction which engaged learners in working in groups or individually to reconstruct the texts and clarify the meaning and extract grammatical patterns. Also through simulations, learners could undertake discussion and discovery language tasks (Warschauer & Healy 1998).

Considering what was mentioned so far, it can be understood that CALL has considered SLA theories as it has adopted 'interaction' aspect which focuses on learners' encouragement to communicate, exchange information and negotiate meaning (Lightbown & Spada 1999), 'noticing' aspect by internalising linguistic rules in a context-based, communicative language use (Foto 2002, Schmidt 1995), 'comprehensible input' aspect which is exposing learners to meaningful, grammatical information (Krashen 1985) and Swain (1995) 's 'output' theory which concentrates on enhancing learners' fluency and helping them create their own oral and written productions in the process of interaction.

3. Context,Web-based language learning activity design

3.1 Context

In order to catch up with rapid developments in different aspects of life in the world specially education, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has started integrating new technologies into teaching/learning process. Many of secondary schools are equipped with computer labs and internet network. Also computer module is set in the secondary schools' curriculum and is taught two hours a week. In addition, educational institutions have started providing students with laptops in reasonable prices so as to encourage students to familiarise with and use newly emerged technologies. Also, each year Ministry of Education arranges computer courses for teachers to increase their experience and familiarity with new technologies.

When adopting a particular type of technology for teaching and designing the tasks and activities in the classroom, it is important to take students characteristics into consideration because learners' characteristics have a great impact on the way that learners respond to an instructional setting or style.

Kurdish secondary school learners' age ranges from 15-18 years. English language as a major subject, in align with other subjects, is taught in the school and students have been learning English for several years two hours per week. The proposed lesson aims at applying Web Based Language Learning technique to teach "vocabulary" to these students. Below some of learners' characteristics and WBL's impact on them are described to justify the reason behind adopting this technique;

- **Motivation;**

Motivation is the psychological quality that directs the language learners to achieve their goal which is mastery of the target language. Motivation can be categorised into instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation is seen as learners' inclination to acquire a language for utilitarian purposes and to reflect practical advantages and values of learning a target language (Hudson 2000). On the other hand, integrative motivation involves learners' desire to learn more about the cultural community of the target language or to assimilate in the target language community (Norris-Holt 2001).

Felix (2001) envisions that "web" can provide a wonderful potential for creative teachers to motivate students and keep them interested by downloading activities from the web or running audio or video conferences with web activities.

- **Autonomy;**

Learning autonomy is a matter of learners' psychological connection to the concept and process of learning. It is a capacity for critical reflection, detachment, decision-making and independent action (Little 1991).

Teaching approaches in Kurdistan secondary schools are mainly teacher-centred and curriculum in these schools does not encourage learners to take individual responsibilities for their own language mastery. They are under direct supervision of the teacher and they mostly depend on teacher and text books.

WBL can Grant them an adequate autonomy through creating a learning environment which encompasses more effective and richer resources and a more flexible learning pace. Additionally, it can provide a natural context and a promising background for autonomous learning (Ward & Newlands 1998). Web-based learning can also influence students' meta-knowledge and foster their capability for planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning. This in turn, leads to promoting autonomous learning (O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

- **Attitude;**

The way that students perceive its advantages and disadvantages, web-based learning can influence their attitude. One of its significant advantages is schedule flexibility which gives students a chance to learn, navigate and search regardless the time and location as long as they have an Internet connection. Another advantage is ease of access and being affordable. Merely having a computer, laptop, iPad or even a mobile, students can get access to a plethora of resources and information that they can make use of for their learning purposes. Having basic capabilities, helps students enter the e-learning environment and utilize internet browsing, e-mail communication, writing, pronunciation and other software facilities. If students lack these rudimentary skills, efficient learning through e-learning is diminished and students are encountered with a stressful feeling, which can turn into insecurity and frustration. Consequently, this will negatively influence on students' attitude towards e-learning.

Some research have been conducted and they have shown that students generally have a positive attitude towards web-based language learning especially if there is an adequate support available for them (Kuittinen 1998).

3.2 Web Based Language Learning and Activity Design

Generally, Web can provide language learners with authentic materials and information and brings the target language world into the learning experience. Creating authentic, meaningful and interactive tasks or activities which consider learners' language level and their needs are crucial for promoting interaction and communication among learners (Felix 1999).

WBL implies using the web and exploiting its resources, materials, tools or applications. It allows learners to interact through using synchronic and non-synchronic communicative tools. Also web-based projects give the learners an opportunity to publish information on the web. Teacher can

create ,for example ,a "blog" and provide learners with diverse e-authentic materials so that they can communicate and interact via different e-tools.

Web-based tasks can expose learners to adequate comprehensible input and offer them opportunities to understand this input by incorporating reading, audio and printing information which are designed according to learners' needs (Ellis 2003). Web-based tasks also help learners and make the input more comprehensible by :

- 1) Giving clear instructions to them to tackle web-based tasks.
- 2) Making the content easy to navigate and download for instance, easy downloadable audio materials so that learners can repeatedly listen to them after completion of tasks.
- 3) written, and recorded anecdotes and drawn pictures which are related to the materials and topics of the tasks.This helps learners understand the target culture.
- 4) Guiding learners through function and content of the website by catering web links with explanations.
- 5) Providing various topics and different levels of difficulty so as to meet learners different interests and needs.

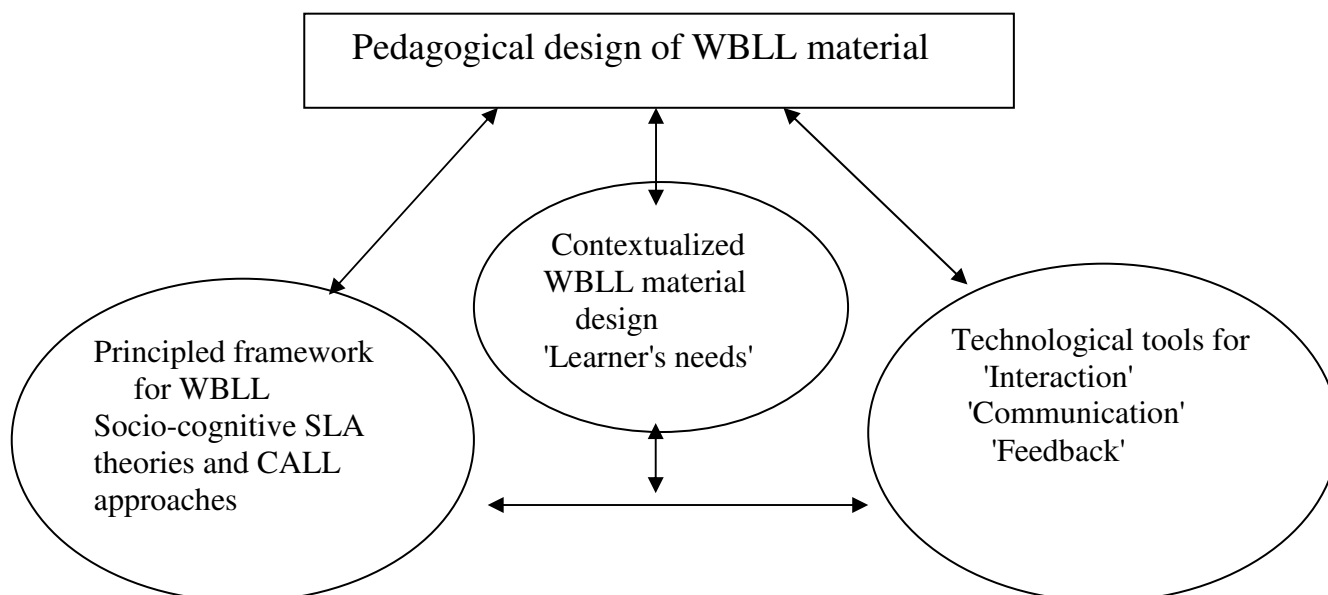


Figure indicating relation among learner needs, SLA and CALL

4. Activities and Implementation

The aim of these activities were re-checking students' vocabulary and comprehension knowledge about 'natural disasters' in a three-part test which they had been taught earlier. The class time was 60 minutes at which 50 minutes was allotted for the test and 10 minutes was allocated for giving instructions at the beginning as well as collecting and checking the answers at the end of each test section. The test was carried out in the computer lab. Students were given the details about the test sections and were required to accomplish them using technology.

The first part was a multiple choice quiz which had to be done individually in 10 minutes. The second part was a crossword puzzle quiz and students were asked to do it in pair in 10 minutes. The last section of the test was creating a poster about natural disasters, which was later used for an oral presentation, in group in 30 minutes. Regarding this section, students had to surf the net collaboratively to find suitable materials such as pictures, definitions, ... etc. The first and the second sections were uploaded in a blog which had been previously created for this purpose and students were given the address and the password of the blog before they start the test.

Instructions for carrying out each part of the test were given as follow:

1. Multiple choice quiz (8 question)

- A. Go to the blog and enter the username and the password
- B. Read the instruction on the worksheet carefully before doing the activity
- C. Record the correct answer letter and the number of attempts you have made.

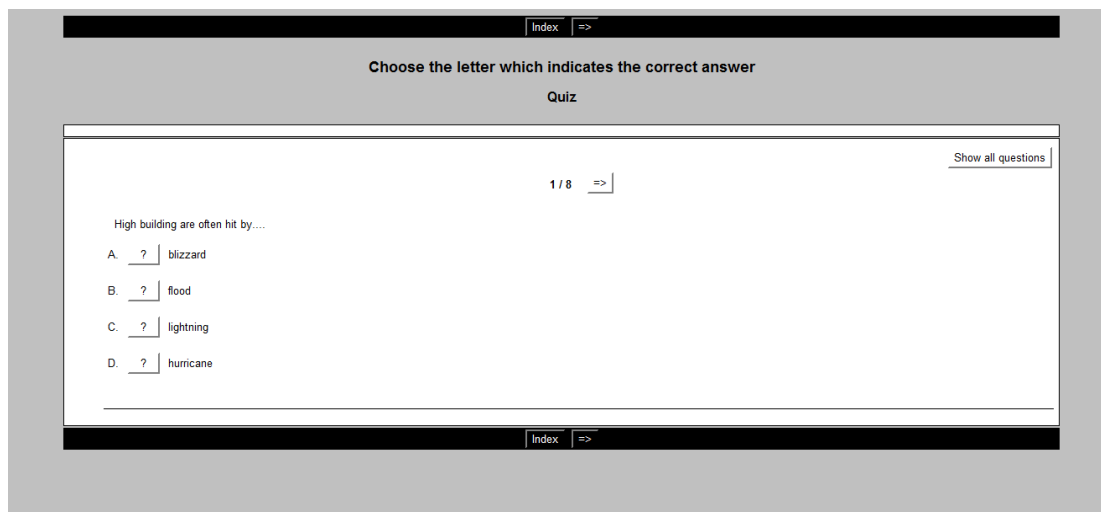


Figure 1. Screen shot from the multiple-choice quiz question
(Designed using HotPotatoes Application)

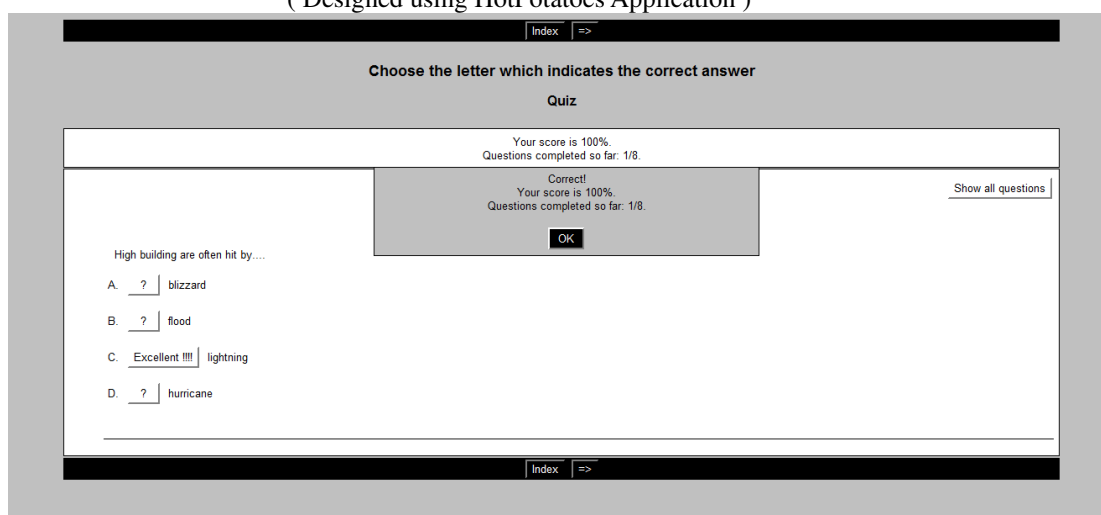


Figure 2. Screen shot of the multiple-choice quiz question' answer along with providing the immediate feedback
(Designed using HotPotatoes Application)

2. Crossword puzzle (6 questions)

- This is a pair work. You need to work together and share your ideas about the answers.
- Read the instruction carefully and then answer the question. You need to write the answer in the box and the click 'Enter'.
- In case of having difficulty in answering, click on 'hint' to see the initial letter of the answer.
- Record the word(s) that you had difficulty with while answering the questions.

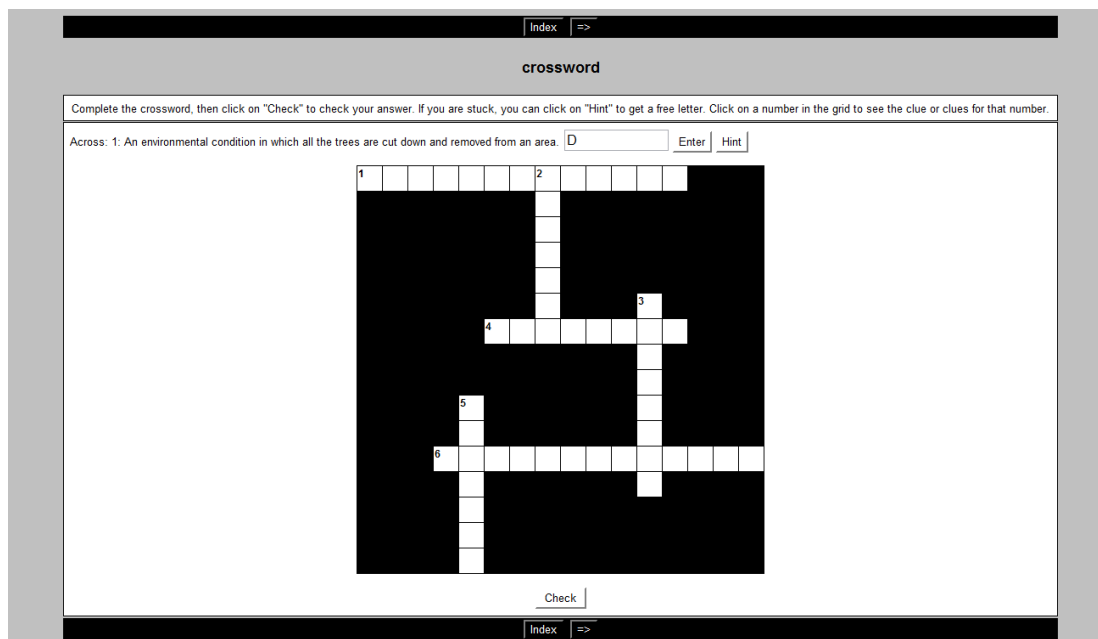


Figure 1. Screen shot of the crossword puzzle question with a hint
(Designed using HotPotatoes Application)

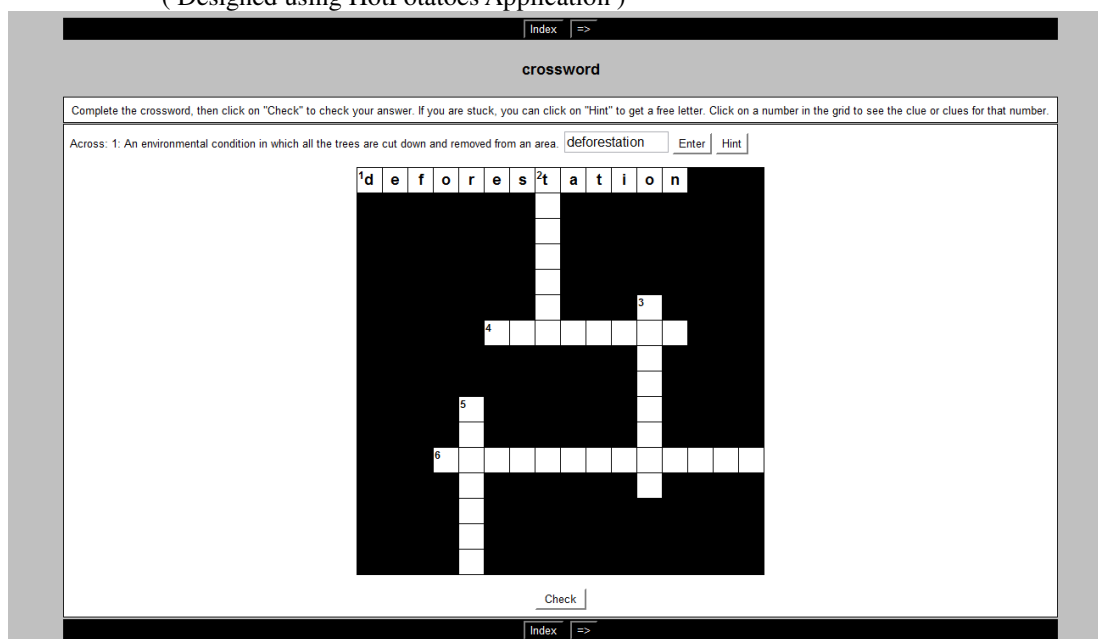


Figure.2. Screen shot of the crossword puzzle question with the answer
(Designed using HotPotatoes Application)

NOTE: After finishing both parts, you can go to this website to learn more about the pronunciation of the given vocabulary items;

<http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

3. Creating a poster about natural disasters

- A. Choose a natural disaster that you would like to talk about.
- B. Find the information about the topic on the web.
- C. Create a poster about it using the materials (pictures, articles, passages,...) available on the web.

Useful websites:

1. <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/>
2. www.youtube.com
3. www.reuters.com

4. www.guardian.co.uk
5. <http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0775896.html>



Figure : An example of natural disasters poster
 (<http://www.instantdisplay.co.uk/naturaldisasters.htm>)

5. Evaluation of the designed Test (Activities)

5.1 Language Learning Potential

These activities are designed to teach vocabulary and their aim is to provide an opportunity for students to focus on particular vocabulary items that are used to describe natural phenomena . Through these activities, students are exposed to same vocabulary items frequently (to increase the possibility of their remembrance) along with providing their usage and definition so as to install their meaning and usage in their mind. The variety of exercises will attribute to their English language improvement . By the end of each activity (first and second activity) , there will be a formative feedback and final score which will indicate their mastery of language concerning that material. For the third activity (oral presentation of the poster), the teacher will provide necessary feedback in the classroom.

5.2 Meaning focus

Along with the linguistic usage, a suitable context is provided using these web-based activities in which students can understand the use and manipulation of these vocabulary items. Pictures, videos and texts (web surfing and navigating for different sources concerning activities specially the third activity) helps students construct a relation between form and meaning of the given vocabulary items. This will help them understand and remember the meaning of the vocabulary items.

5.3 Learner fit

The nature of designed activities (individual, pair work and group work) and the level of difficulty (easy , intermediate and challenging) corresponds with different expectations of the students. This leads students to actively engage and interact in different levels (student-content, student-student and student-teacher). Teacher plays a monitoring role and students are given enough time and autonomy to deal with the activities. They feel , to a great extent , independent and variety of web-based learning tools and activities , that consider their needs and language capacity as well as less stressed learning environment , motivates them and promotes their self-confidence in using technological tools and facing the challenges within activities.

5.4 Authenticity

Activities are designed to include different aspects of the target language for instance grammar, writing, pronunciation and speaking however, the main focus is on vocabulary. Learners will be able to adopt and use the target vocabulary items in any communicative situation related to the topic inside and outside of the classroom.

5.5 Positive impact of CALL on students

CALL and specifically WBLL tools for these activities positively influence the students as they turn learning

process into an interactive, cooperative and learner-centred style which is accompanied by fun rather than a restrained, monotonous teacher-centred style which mostly focuses on text books. CALL provides a rich, colourful learning environment in which students feel motivated and more autonomous.

5.6 Practicality

The web-based learning language is adequate and suitable for my given context because students are given clear instruction about using technology tools for the activities. Also teacher as monitor and facilitator is available there to provide help whenever necessary. The sufficient number of computers are available in the lab. and students are also told to bring their laptops in case they needed (many of them have their own laptop). Students are put under little pressure with regard to time (first two activities) to re-create the exam situation (like doing exams on paper in real situation) to make them do their best in a short period of time. This might create anxiety in some students and frustrate them but the cooperative and interactive nature of the activities along with teacher's help can reduce this anxiety and turn the process into an enjoyable experience.

6. Conclusion

The appearance of CALL and its integration into teaching/learning process has diversified language teaching methodology and design of tasks and activities.

WBLL as a beneficial component of CALL can be adopted in teaching/learning the target language as it provides students with a customized approach of learning the language which suits their learning styles (some students may focus on 'listening' or 'reading' and some others may prefer 'watching'). It also grants a continuous access to variety of different resources.

WBLL focuses on a learner-centred teaching approach and encourages a high level of students' engagement and participation in the learning process through student-teacher, student-student and student-content interaction.

Assessing students' abilities is an essential part of teaching/learning process. Online assessment tools help teachers know about the success of their teaching method and determine if students' progress is satisfactory. Web-based testing can also have pedagogical benefits. In students' view, frequent assessments can reinforce learning and increase their motivation. In Web-based testing, grading is computerised and students are provided with immediate feedback. This can reduce the amount of anxiety which is common in testing environment as well as minimising the embarrassment of some students who perform poorly.

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