
Global themes at EUROCALL 2017

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors reflect on their visit to The European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning (EUROCALL) twenty-fifth annual conference, held at the University of Southampton in August of 2017. The main theme (“CALL in a Climate of Change: Adapting to Turbulent Global Conditions”) is addressed, as well as further sub-themes (digital literacy and the digital native, computer mediated communication to promote cross-cultural engagement, and the provision of technologically mediated feedback and individualized learning opportunities) which emerged from the presentations the authors attended.

The European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning (EUROCALL) held its twenty-fifth annual conference at the University of Southampton in August of 2017, and with the assistance of a Nanzan University Pache Research Subsidy I-A-2 for the academic year 2017 the authors were able to attend and present the initial research findings of our investigation into aspects of digital literacy. This prestigious annual conference is always well attended by an international audience, including many from Japan, and we found the quality of research and presentation to be very high. In this paper we discuss some of the themes we noticed, and touch upon how they connect with our own work.

The conference theme, “CALL in a Climate of Change: Adapting to Turbulent Global Conditions”, seemed appropriate for the challenging times the world is currently experiencing. Taken literally, the allusion to ‘climate...change’ was addressed by researchers who are utilising technology to develop sustainable models of education. Many conference attendees were also aware of their positions in a turbulent geopolitical climate. It seems opportune that an event

celebrating European cooperation was scheduled to be held in the UK as it is preparing to separate from the European Union, and the participants did their best to continue making connections across borders through shared research. This may be one way to adapt to turbulent global conditions.

Each of the three keynote speakers was able to address the theme of the conference through his or her own work. Steve Thorne, Associate Professor of Second Language Acquisition in the Department of World Languages and Literatures at Portland State University, gave the opening keynote entitled “Language, Learning, the Wild and Rewilding.” This keynote was incredibly wide-ranging and perhaps over-ambitious, but most successful when tying theory to practice. Of particular interest was Dr. Thorne’s work in Alaska, using mobile augmented reality applications to help learners of the endangered indigenous language Yup’ik.

David Millard, Associate Professor of Computer Science at the University of Southampton and the second keynote speaker, delivered an excellent overview of how the internet became what it is today. In “People Like You Like Presentations Like This” he explained how, despite the utopian intentions of many of the creators of the world wide web, we now find ourselves threatened by data collection, mass surveillance, and democracy-disrupting “fake news”. Dr. Millard has a tangential relationship with language education, which perhaps made his contribution all the more valuable; his concise and engaging explanation of how we might “develop software and policies that help, rather than harm” was enlightening.

The final keynote was presented by Shannon Sauro of Malmö University, Sweden. “Looking to Fandom in a Time of Change” considered how original works and adaptations created by fans using existing characters and worlds (e.g., Harry Potter or Sherlock Holmes) allow learners to express their own stories and respond to “changes and challenges in their socio-political landscape”. Such practices are not new, but mediation by technology has both broadened and deepened connections across fandoms, partially through the easing of geographic barriers to participation.

Each of the three keynote speeches dealt with language and technology released into ‘the wild’ to some extent. Both language and technology are human constructs, but neither are fully under our control. The speakers suggested ways

of repurposing or adapting existing technologies (such as augmented reality or data collection) and language practices (such as storytelling or fan fiction) to fashion the educational landscapes that we want.

While the headline speakers brought us together and covered the broader, general themes, other presenters discussed their own more particular research. Over the course of the conference, several recurring concepts emerged for us. The first, perhaps especially noticeable to us as the subject of our own research, was digital literacy and the digital native. Another was the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) to promote cross-cultural engagement, while a third was providing technologically mediated feedback and individualized learning opportunities.

In our report “Normalisation in Flux: Examining Digital Literacy in the Japanese University Context”, we focused primarily on student levels of comfort and usage of various technologies. Several presenters discussed their own findings in this area, especially as a precursor to further investigations. Louise Ohashi, in “Independent Language Learning and the Role of the Teacher”, described the lack of confidence many Japanese university students feel in using technology for educational purposes. Her small scale survey squared with ours in uncovering relatively low comfort levels with technology use amongst young adults. Mehraza Alizadeh, representing a team from Osaka, reported similar data as part of her presentation “Designing and Developing a Blended Course: Best Practices for Japanese Learners”.

Several presenters described cross-cultural CMC projects, apropos of the global theme. Hsin-chou Huang described her project with Yumiko Furumura, “Using Telecollaboration 2.0 to Foster Language Skills and Intercultural Learning”, which involved an online collaboration between language learners in Japan and Taiwan. Their research showed students improving their communicative skills as well as developing personal connections and deeper understandings of each other’s cultures. Mari Yamauchi of the Chiba University of Commerce presented a similar project (“How Virtual Exchange can help prepare Japanese students for intercultural communication”), this time between students in Japan and Colombia, reporting increased willingness to communicate and reduced affective filters. Jan Berggren and Christopher Allen’s project, “The assessment of digital project work in the EFL classroom”, was one in which secondary students created multimedia

map annotations in English to explain details about places in their hometown in Sweden to actual or virtual foreign visitors. These descriptions share local knowledge and opinion which adds depth beyond the information one might find in a guidebook. Meanwhile, the two presentations led by Mehrasa Alizadeh provided immediate examples, through the use of teleconferencing technology to allow her co-researcher to join the sessions from Japan even though she had been denied a visa to enter the UK for the conference, of how technology can help reduce geopolitical barriers to collaboration and learning.

One perennial challenge for language educators is finding ways to give comprehensive, individualized instruction and feedback to learners within the limited time available to do so, and many of the presentations we attended addressed using technology to aid in this. Shinichi Hashimoto gave a very clear and engaging description of a pilot program involving computer-mediated peer evaluation forms that generated timely, high-volume instructor-curated feedback on in-class presentations in “Pedagogical Application of Online Peer Evaluations of Oral Presentations”. He found the system also promoted more engagement in listening to peer presentations, which likewise encouraged presenters to more fully communicate with the whole audience rather than just address the instructor. Another challenge with assessment, appropriately evaluating language learning projects that involve aspects such as developing multimedia literacy, was addressed in Berggren and Allen’s session noted above. The associated research and professional development activities they discussed are one example of an area where CALL research may be on the leading edge of wider educational theory and practice.

One or both of us attended some of the presentations which addressed approaches to individualized learning and differentiated instruction. One of these was Ohashi’s presentation, noted above, which described an investigation into training and support for writing students to help them access online resources in support of their own learning goals. The poster of Hironobu Okazaki, et al., “Approach toward the construction of an automated tailor-made curriculum”, described an automated, individualized listening instruction system, called Personal Listening MANager (PLIMA), for identifying learner weaknesses and providing tailored exercises to help them improve those areas. Lisha Xu, in her session

“Developing Multimedia Supplementary Materials to Support Learning Chinese Characters at Beginning Level”, described a moodle-based system she created to aid university students studying Chinese to master 450 novice level characters along with strategies for continued learning. “Data-Mining and Data-Driven Learning for ESP Education in Japan” told how Jie Shi and Sébastien Louvigné have leveraged digital corpus data to help graduate students identify and use the language they need for producing research articles for international publication. They found that the students could use the corpus data to more accurately and easily engage in written discourse using field-specific and appropriate language. Thomas Robb described his analysis of the effectiveness of a suite of online learning resources the students in his university are required to use as part of their coursework. In his presentation, “An analysis of TOEFL IBT section gain scores with various online activities”, he noted several positive correlations between improved TOEFL IBT scores and these activities, with some variation of effect size based on the starting English proficiency level of the students.

A session which also examined overarching themes of CALL was “CALL Research: Where Are We Now? Part 2”, in which John Gillespie gave us both an overview of what topics have been explored and published and ideas about where we could be going as researchers. As might be guessed from our descriptions above, the topics of intercultural CMC and digital literacy are among those being widely published now. Also, he noted there is a move towards qualitative studies, and he sees discussion of normalisation as one emerging topic. He gave our joint research and presentation specific mention as an example of the latter.

Attending this conference gave us not only the opportunity to share our initial findings with, and get feedback from, an international audience, it also enabled us to meet with researchers pursuing similar and complementary lines of inquiry, enriching our approach as we continue this project. We have also gained theoretical and practical knowledge and inspiration to help us in making sound pedagogical decisions regarding technology use in our own teaching practice. We can strongly recommend this annual conference for teachers interested in applying educational technology to language teaching and learning.