

Technology- Enhanced Learning Environments



Edited by Elizabeth Hanson-Smith

Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series
Jill Burton, Series Editor



Technology- Enhanced Learning Environments

Edited by Elizabeth Hanson-Smith

Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series

Jill Burton, Series Editor



Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

Typeset in Berkley and Belwe
by Capitol Communications Systems, Inc., Crofton, Maryland USA
and printed by Pantagraph Printing, Bloomington, Illinois USA
Indexing by Coughlin Indexing Services, Inc., Annapolis, Maryland USA

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.
700 South Washington Street, Suite 200
Alexandria, Virginia 22314 USA
Tel 703-836-0774 • Fax 703-836-6447 • E-mail tesol@tesol.org • <http://www.tesol.org/>

Director of Communications and Marketing: Helen Kornblum
Managing Editor: Marilyn Kupetz
Copy Editor: Christa Watters
Additional Reader: Ellen Garshick
Cover Design: Charles Akins and Ann Kammerer

Copyright © 2000 by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any informational storage and retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.

All names of teachers, teacher learners, and students are pseudonyms unless noted. Teacher and student work samples are included with permission.

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holders for permission to reprint borrowed material. We regret any oversights that may have occurred and will rectify them in future printings of this work.

ISBN 0-9939791-83-8
Library of Congress Catalogue No. 00-131548

CHAPTER 2



Designing a CALL Facility From Bottom to Top at the Military Language Institute in Abu Dhabi

Vance Stevens

◆ INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) component of a language program designed for the military of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Military Language Institute (MLI) is a school in the UAE where military personnel either increase their basic competency in the languages taught or prepare for further study in the country where that language is used. The UAE military contract with Amideast (a private, nonprofit organization providing educational advising services in the Middle East and North Africa) for a state-of-the-art facility using innovative technology and curriculum presented us with a unique opportunity to design a program that applied technology in appropriate ways to the teaching of languages.

◆ CONTEXT

The MLI is an institute dedicated to the study of languages in a military context: Students are UAE military personnel who have been released from duty for a course of study that could lead to further studies abroad. At the higher levels the institute requires training in the culture as well as academic discourse in the language of the target country. English and French are the only languages taught, but other languages will be offered in the future.

The MLI is housed in a one-story building consisting of about 75 classrooms and offices ringing a central courtyard. The building has been tastefully renovated from a previously existing facility, with a central garden and walkways replacing what was once a concrete exercise yard. Air-conditioned corridors with potted plants on marble floors now link classroom spaces that previously opened to the elements. A new two-story building is being constructed nearby to expand the facility to its full capacity of about 450 students. The facility will house administration offices, eight CALL labs, and a student resource center.

Although military language training has existed for some time in the UAE, the creation of the MLI in its new quarters marks a conceptual as well as physical break with the past. The newly designed program is much different from, for example, the lockstep Defense Language Institute (Monterey, CA) model. The emphasis in our curriculum is on the communicative approach, and our facilities have been planned

to promote communication not only through the curriculum, but also through design of the physical plant, as explained later in this chapter.

The students, too, are perhaps different from others in the UAE. The computer revolution has caught up with the people of the Gulf region. Internet service is available through the phone company to any resident who wants it, with the result that it is not unusual for Internet connections to be found in Emirati homes and businesses. The phone company even offers second phone lines at half the price of the first one. There is a Cyber Cafe in downtown Abu Dhabi, and the Internet is available to the walk-in public at the Cultural Foundation, which houses Abu Dhabi's public library. Editorials have appeared in local newspapers decrying the fact that educational institutions are lagging behind in connectivity as compared to what many already have at home.

Many of the students accepted into the MLI own computers; after only a brief exposure to computers at the MLI, others have taken the initiative of buying their own. There are often queries from students regarding how they can purchase their own copies of MLI software, with the result that one of our suppliers has left a stack of calling cards at the Institute and offered to sell to students at bulk prices. Even in cases when students and teachers lack prior experience with computers, they accept and adapt to the CALL component.

◆ DESCRIPTION

Many Emiratis are sent abroad for further studies in English-speaking countries, but prior to this program, they were sent off with inadequate command of the language. Accordingly, one purpose of the MLI is to enhance the amount of intensive language training available in the home country, with the goal of ensuring that those going abroad achieve a score of at least 450 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) before being allowed to depart for further studies.

The MLI has eight levels, each lasting 8 weeks. The curriculum is patterned on the six books in the *Spectrum* series (Dye & Frankfort, 1993), plus a pre-*Spectrum* basic level and an advanced post-*Spectrum* academic level. The *Spectrum* series of texts and workbooks presents a carefully graded syllabus incorporating a natural approach (e.g., an emphasis on comprehension leading to meaningful expression). Accordingly, the lessons in *Spectrum* attempt to present authentic-sounding language (e.g., radio broadcasts and telephone messages) in thematically based lessons, while giving students a feeling of success and achievement. At some point, we anticipate that *Spectrum* will be replaced with materials developed in-house. We envisage a multimedia course and have brought in consultants to help with its development.

To foster the intimate class interaction on which communicative language teaching relies, MLI limits class size to 12 students. This limitation was literally built into the design of the facility. The institute built walls to divide in half the large classrooms it inherited from the previous occupants and purchased furniture of dimensions such that 12 desks can comfortably fit in the available space, but no more. If the number of students in a class exceeds 12, then it is divided, so that many classes have fewer than 12 students. Thus the physical plant ensures optimal class size, permitting students and teachers to get to know each other and interact intensively throughout the day and throughout the program.

The students' day is broken into five periods: three core classes based on

Spectrum or pre- or post-*Spectrum* materials, a CALL lab, and an enrichment period. When students go to the CALL lab, they work with the Internet or the available software to improve their language skills. Instructors can devote the enrichment period to whatever is needed at the moment, for example, TOEFL preparation, writing, or further computer-enhanced work.

Enrichment is a key word in the philosophy of the CALL facility at the MLI. The CALL facility seeks to create an environment where barriers to the use of computers by staff and students are broken down through seamless and convenient access. Networked computers are available on teachers' desks, in classrooms, and in student labs; and teachers manage their use through teacher and student home pages on our local area network (LAN), which includes access to the Internet.

The CALL Lab

Hardware components include

- high-end WinTel-based computer workstations using Intel chips and running the Microsoft Windows operating systems with ample hard drive space
- CD-ROM drive and headsets with microphones (conducive to use with speech recognition)
- scanners
- digital photo cameras, with use of digital video cameras anticipated
- network servers, hubs, routers, cables

Software includes

- tutorials for teaching grammar, structure, or content material
- text manipulation applications, such as cloze makers
- productivity tools such as networking, multimedia, and integrated office applications
- reference materials: on- and off-line dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases
- interactive learning applications for exploring topics or skills in the target language
- concordancing and text analysis tools

The teachers have augmented this software with their own CALL and computer-based creations, such as JavaScript forms and exercises created with such applications as Hot Potatoes (Holmes, Arneil, & Street, 1999), Microsoft PowerPoint (1997) slide shows, teacher home pages for managing class activities, materials created with The Authoring Suite (Jones & Trackman, 1998), digital video and listening activities, and Web-based projects, including student-designed home pages.

Constraints on Implementation

As one would expect in the construction of a language center almost anywhere in the world, the CALL program has suffered constraints outside the control of the academic staff. Although the following problems were successfully resolved, they had to be dealt with during the initial phases of startup.

1. Although teaching staff had been in the country for a couple of months prior to the March startup, computers were not procured during this time in adequate numbers for the preparation of these staff members. As is often the case, the few computers available had to be used for administrative tasks rather than for teacher education.
2. Despite the fact that network equipment and software were specified long in advance of startup, the logistics of procurement and delivery delayed arrival of the server and terminals until just the week before the students were due to arrive. This in turn delayed what we could prepare the staff to do in the CALL labs.
3. Even when training was conducted, it was difficult to convey to those with little prior experience with computers the exact nature of what they would be doing once our networked facility was up and running.
4. Internet access for the first 5 months of operation was limited to only one computer in the facility and was available for use solely by teaching staff. Therefore, Internet access for students could not initially be a part of the CALL lab program, and teachers themselves made only limited use of this asset.

Of particular concern were our five Egyptian bilingual advisors. The level of English of these advisors was excellent; however, as they were not native speakers, they could not be core teachers. Because our native-English-speaking teachers were initially in short supply, we decided that the bilingual advisors would teach all of the CALL lab periods. This created a certain level of anxiety in our advisors, only one of whom had had any experience at all using computers. Because there was nothing in Abu Dhabi resembling the setup they were going to be using, we were unable to give these advisors a clear impression of what they would do once classes started. That is, we could train them in use of the software, but it was difficult to convey to them how these skills were going to fit together and be applied in the classes they would be teaching. As we came close to the week of startup with no network in place, it was impossible for us even to give them a set of instructions for how the students would turn the computers on and access the server.

Given the very tight temporal constraints, we decided to use text manipulation as a means of getting the CALL classes up and running in the short amount of time available. Text manipulation software uses templates that degrade a text in some way and provide an interface through which the student can restore the text to its original state. A common text manipulation program is a cloze generator, where words are replaced by gaps and the students must supply the missing words. Other examples are whole-text deletion programs, where students must restore the original text from scratch, perhaps while listening to a digital recording of the passage read aloud; and sentence, phrase, or paragraph scrambling applications, where the components of a structure are displayed out of order and students have to restore them to the correct order.

A text manipulation component has appeal because many researchers believe that text reconstruction helps students practice prediction strategies in reading and become attentive to paragraph and sentence structure. Another strong appeal is its ease of implementation. Text manipulation software typically acts on ASCII text.

Thus it is possible to produce numerous exercises using the same texts the students are studying by importing those texts into the software templates.

Because our scanners had not arrived by the week before classes started, we mobilized the entire teaching staff at the MLI to type a corpus of texts systematically selected from the various levels of the *Spectrum* series. The object was to put in place as quickly as possible a computer-based set of materials with clear relevance to all levels of our curriculum. Several text manipulation templates were used, among them Fun With Texts (Bruzzone & Davies, 1997), SuperCloze (Stevens & Millmore, 1996b), and Hangman in Context (Stevens & Millmore, 1996a), but the mainstay of our text manipulation implementation was The Authoring Suite from Wida Software (Jones & Trackman, 1998). Besides having an impressive range of templates, The Authoring Suite allowed easy integration of sound files with the texts the teachers were producing, a compelling feature considering that so many of the *Spectrum* texts had accompanying recordings.

We contacted Prentice Hall and asked how the company would react to our digitizing these tape recordings for the purposes outlined here. Their representative gave us the go-ahead in a matter of days, as long as our use of the digitized recordings was restricted to MLI. As digital recordings, the sound files could be played on the computer as students worked on the gap-filling or unscrambling activities.

Text manipulation was appropriate to our setting for several reasons:

- Students and teachers could easily discern the relationship between text manipulation activities and the curriculum since the texts were taken directly from *Spectrum*.
- Novice computer users easily understand the concept of text manipulation and the use of templates to create various exercises from a fixed text base.
- Users can quickly implement a comprehensive amount of material across the curriculum.
- This implementation lends itself particularly well to an environment where the text base is accessible to all from a central server.
- Files created originally for text manipulation can serve as the basis for more innovative applications later—for example, for reading exercises created from JavaScript templates, or as a corpus for research and language practice based on concordancing and text analysis.

Although we had to use the texts on floppy diskettes for a short time before our server came on line, we were eventually able to teach staff the use of the text manipulation software as they learned how to access the network. Just before classes got underway, I met with our advisors for a special training session in the evening. Whereas earlier they had called for step-by-step instructions in using the software, by now the advisors were interested more in knowing how the system worked and where its components were located. Clearly, their anxiety level had substantially diminished, an indication that they were getting a clearer picture of what their role would be and that we were on the right path in setting up a system easily understood by novice users.

In a few months of MLI operation, these inexperienced advisors learned not only to function capably within the limited system set up for them at the outset, but

indeed to flourish. They guided the students in browsing the text database for the exact text covered that morning by their core teacher, and helped them acquire and develop the skills of word processing, home page development, and Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. Now, when dignitaries visit our facility and need to be shown our CALL labs, we might ask the advisors to do the demonstrations. One of these advisors once expressed to me his satisfaction over finding himself in the space of a month or two demonstrating his skills in the capacity of expert after having arrived at the MLI knowing so little about computers. Now, 2 years into the program, these advisors are starting to author interactive materials in JavaScript and upload them to their own Web sites on the Internet. This development is one of our most tangible indications of the success of what we are doing.

◆ DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

The CALL facility at the MLI is unique in the Middle East, and from what we can gather through attendance at conferences, published reports, and the Internet, it appears to compare well to or even surpass other CALL facilities elsewhere in the world in appropriate use of technology in language learning.

Two factors in particular were instrumental in the initial success of this facility: planning and funding. The groundwork for the CALL facility for the MLI was laid in consultations between Amideast personnel and their UAE clients in April 1997. The facility was therefore designed from the outset taking into account the cumulative knowledge and experience of practitioners, as opposed to having evolved from (i.e., being saddled with) an outdated existing setup or a misguided concept of the role computers would play. Also, the UAE military accepted the concept virtually as proposed and did not impose unreasonable financial constraints that would compromise the plan. The result has been a mutually beneficial partnership in which the military gains its state-of-the-art language facility and the academics have had the satisfaction of conceiving and implementing a nearly optimal technology center dedicated to communicative language learning.

Multimedia Environment

One unusual feature of the MLI facility is the inclusion of the classroom in the MLI computer network. It is common in language centers for teachers and students to have access to networked computers at their respective workstations (e.g., in offices and labs), and in lecture halls. But equipping each classroom with multimedia capability is typically beyond the reach of language centers, even in the early 21st century.

Each MLI classroom is a small multimedia studio. The centerpiece is the teacher's workstation, a specially designed desk (described more fully in the next section), with a computer and 17-inch monitor. The computer outputs to both the monitor and a projector mounted in the ceiling at the back of the class, projecting onto a whiteboard that accepts marker pens and reflects the projected image with minimal glare. The teacher has a remote control device to turn the projector on and off, and also to toggle the projector between computer and video signal. Part of the teacher workstation is a cabinet containing a VCR and an audiotape player as well as



an amplifier that pipes sound from the VCR, tape player, or computer to a pair of speakers installed in the ceiling. The acoustics in the small brick rooms are so impressive that special materials had to be installed in the ceiling to buffer the sound so as not to impress those in the next room as well.

The CALL labs are exactly twice the size of a classroom (9 x 9 meters); further, the front half of each lab is appointed in the same way as the classrooms, with a fully-equipped teacher's workstation, ceiling-mounted projector, and whiteboard projection surface. The remainder of the lab is furnished with 12 specially made student desks arranged in three clusters of four desks. The desks are large enough so that students can work comfortably by themselves or in pairs, but clustered so that students can face each other to converse and collaborate. The students' chairs were purchased with wheels expressly to facilitate their ability to join each other in front of the same monitor. All these touches are manifestations of the philosophy of the MLI to break from the expected rows of computers, all students facing the same way, and to deliver instead a language-learning environment that fosters communication and, in turn, enhances language learning.

Teachers' Workstations

It was unexpectedly difficult to arrange the instructor's equipment in such a way that a teacher could use it without the furniture getting in the way. Our criteria for a teacher workstation designed particularly for use with computers in classrooms were:

- Allow separate and flexible articulation and height of mouse, keyboard, and monitor.
- Do not constrain teacher to work from behind the furniture.
- Present VCR, tape player, and amplifier at workable height.
- Position computer unit within cable distance of location where teacher uses keyboard and mouse.
- Provide enough desktop space for briefcase, books and workbooks.
- Hide cabling and prevent overextension.
- Lock equipment when not in use.

We wanted our furniture to be designed so that a language teacher could get close to students, move around the room yet be within reach of the mouse and keyboard, maintain sight of the students, and at the same time see either the monitor or the projection on the whiteboard.

Because we were unable to find such furniture on the market, we ended up designing our own. We scoured catalogs and called in local vendors and draftsmen. To each we tried to describe what we wanted, though even we did not know exactly what that was. We knew we did not want a lectern, with the teacher rooted in place, having to peer around a 17-inch monitor. After considering a number of ready-made possibilities and eliciting a dozen sketches from as many workshops, we went into one of the just renovated classrooms with several teachers, placed cardboard boxes where the desks would be, and tried to anticipate where a teacher might stand while operating the keyboard, looking over the monitor at the students, or viewing the

projection on the whiteboard. We moved around the room among the mock student desks, arms outstretched toward an imaginary mouse that had to be at a certain height and positioned here, or maybe over here.

In the end, we found a local carpenter who was able to put wood where our arms and minds were carving the air. The result was a low desk for the teacher with two adjustable platforms that articulate to fit flush over the desktop, although either or both can swivel out and extend the desktop in either direction. The desk is hinged to a cabinet fixed at the wall in the corner of the room to prevent overextending the cabling. In the cabinet are the VCR, tape deck, and amplifier. The teacher can stand near the cabinet, behind the desk, with the keyboard raised to waist height on the nearer platform, and look at the class over the monitor with the farther platform lowered to desk height. The class follows the teacher's mouse movements on the whiteboard. Or the teacher can reverse the position of the monitor and keyboard, placing the latter on the farther platform, which will now be raised. By swiveling that platform out, the teacher can move about in the center of the room. Because the whole unit moves in an arc on its hinge, the teacher can position himself at other points in the room as well, even all the way to the side of the class so that he can look at the whiteboard with his students (see Figure 1).

CALL Lab Furniture

We were so pleased with the resulting teacher's workstation that we had the same carpenter work on our lab furniture as well. Here again we were unable to find

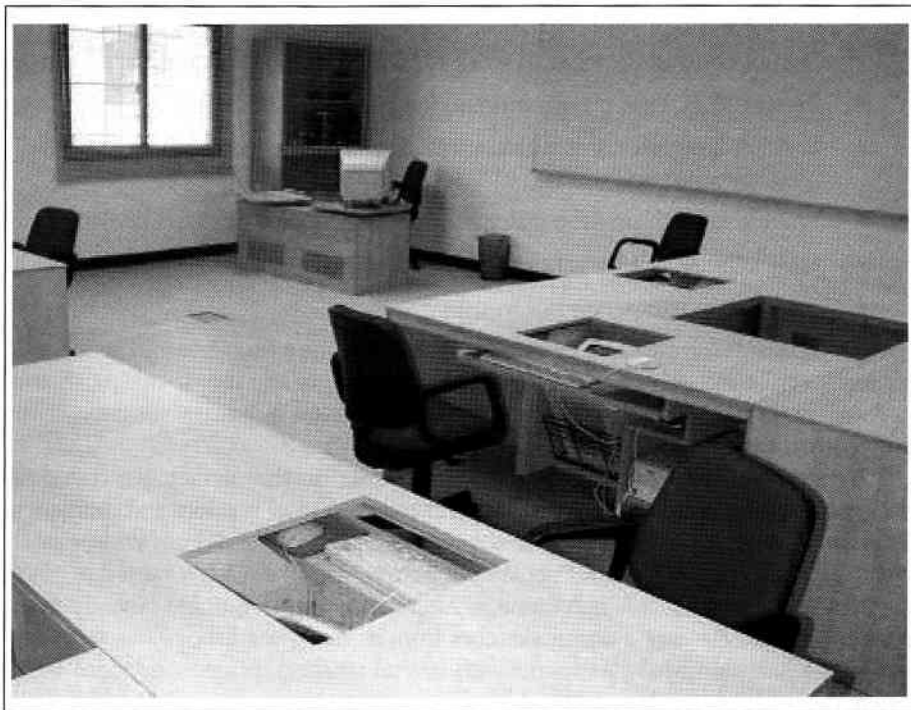


FIGURE 1. Teacher's Workstation (upper left) and Recessed Monitors in Student Desks. Photo: Vance Stephens.

exactly what we were looking for in one commercially made product. For design considerations, we looked at Web sites of existing labs, and dug out archives on the topic from the electronic lists, *NETEACH-L*¹ and *TESLCA-L* (a *TESL-L*² branch). We came up with the following considerations for designing student CALL lab furniture that promotes collaboration and communication as well as individual learning:

- Students are clustered facing each other.
- Monitors can be adjusted to recessed or semirecessed positions for easy viewing of each other, the teacher, and whiteboard.
- Whiteboard projection is available for whole class work.
- Table size allows students to work in pairs at one station, and gives them ample room for books and writing materials.

It was easy to meet our first criterion, to design furniture of the correct size, and that could be clustered. However, I insisted on recessed or semirecessed monitors after visiting a lab at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (directed by Leo Van Lier). There, students worked at lab desks with fully recessed monitors, designed by the Nova company. We did not know if our students would prefer recessed or semirecessed monitors, and it appeared to us that the Nova equipment could let us have either configuration, but not both (and it would have to be shipped at great expense overseas). Once again, our carpenter came to our aid and designed a handsome lab desk with a mechanism on wooden rails that would allow the monitor to remain beneath a sliding surface of nonglare glass pulled flush with the desktop, or to be raised to a position just poking over the desktop.

After a year of use, we find that students use the labs almost always with the monitors in the semirecessed position. This could be because we gave them ample desk space (our third consideration), so they do not need the space taken by the protruding monitor. Students with smaller desks might prefer to use the monitors fully recessed to increase their workspace. We gave our students large desks after reading commentary on the electronic lists warning of too-small desktops. Now that our students have ample space for their books, we find that either they silently appreciate this feature, or they complain that the desks are a bit too large and distance them from their fellow students. From this we conclude that there is no pleasing some people.

Home Pages

Another unique feature of work at the MLI is that each teacher has a home page accessible from the server. This is necessary and desirable for consistency and continuity in language learning at the MLI. As students move from one level to the next, they know that they can find out about their new teacher and his class from his home page, which they can locate in a predictable spot. Also, when teachers are

¹ *NETEACH-L* [Electronic list]. To subscribe send the message "sub *NETEACH-L* yourfirstname yourlastname" to listproc@ukans.edu. (Available from <http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/english/neteach/main.html>)

² *TESL-L* [Electronic list]. To subscribe, send the message "sub *TESL-L* yourfirstname yourlastname" to listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu. Example: sub *TESL-L* John Wayne. (Information available by e-mail to teslhelp@cunyvm.cuny.edu)

team-teaching or when an advisor must coordinate what he does in the CALL lab with what has just been happening in class, instantly updated home pages can serve as a convenient tool to make information available to both teachers and students (see Figure 2).

Teachers who have never made a home page before initially find this aspect the most daunting of all that is expected of them at the MLI. However, they generally find other teachers willing to share their expertise. The institute regularly gives seminars, including a popular “Homegrown CALL” series featuring teacher home pages. The seminars help each of our teachers succeed in creating a home page particular to his classes. Even the most rudimentary home pages introduce the teacher and offer a syllabus or description of the class, a class schedule or calendar showing assignments and testing dates, and at the very least, a list of students—all set in appealing graphics. As the teacher and class develop their skills, the list of students might become linked to the students’ own home page creations, and the teacher is likely to extend his links to topics of interest that can be used to focus activities in the class, or to JavaScript exercises found in numerous sites on the Web, or to those created by the teacher from templates such as Hot Potatoes (Holmes, Arneil, & Street, 1999). Some teachers even adapt the templates into their own interactive pages to make them increasingly sophisticated and utilitarian. Examples of MLI teacher home pages have been placed on the Web for public view at *MLI Teacher Websites* (Stevens, 1999).

Teachers can find novel uses for a class home page. Because classes and offices are all connected on the local network, a teacher can work on class materials in his office and project them on the whiteboard in class moments later. The class can then refer to these materials later in the teacher’s workspace on the server. As they familiarize themselves with the technology, instructors alter their teaching in

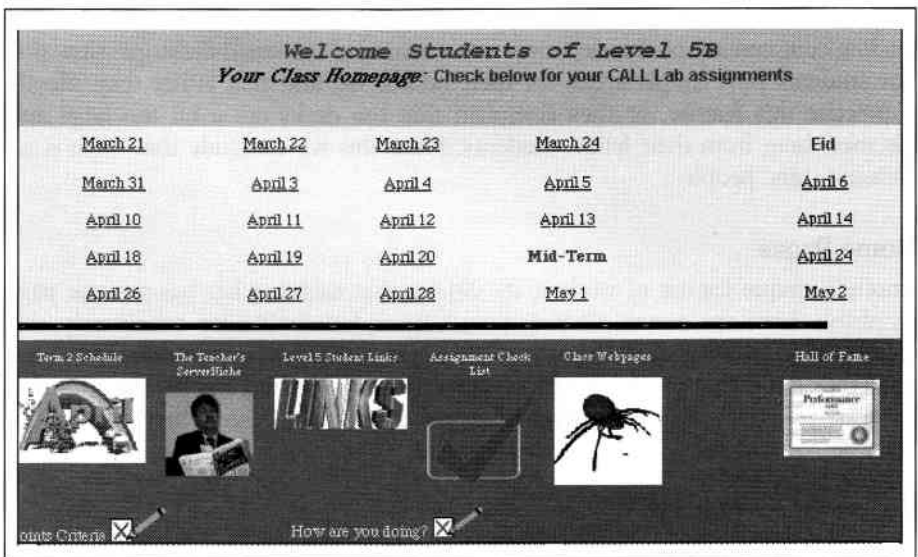


FIGURE 2. *Welcome Students of Level 5B*, a Teacher Home Page at the MLI. Dates link to descriptions of class activities (Sellers, 1999). Reprinted with permission of Mark Sellers.

imaginative ways to accommodate and utilize the potential of such capabilities. For example, the possibilities for linking home pages are endless. As Web sites often include audio and video clips, there is great scope for finding motivating materials. Our teachers have developed methods for grabbing slow-loading materials such as sound and video files and fiddling the HTML code on the original Web site to make them work instantaneously in lab settings. This is yet another indication of the sophistication reached in only the first year of operation of the MLI. Innovations are largely teacher driven in an environment where computers and software tools are almost seamlessly available.

Organization

The scope for linkage within the MLI is also compelling. When I started teaching in the mid-1970s, we used to mimeograph materials for our classes. There was usually a teacher or a committee who made a vain stab at compiling some of these materials in a filing cabinet somewhere so that others could perhaps make use of them. Think of all the mimeographed copies that have been abandoned in rusted filing cabinets throughout the careers of teachers. Now that teachers are working in machine-readable media linked to home pages on a server, the filing cabinet is finally accessible to all (and it never rusts). Teachers can readily link to each other's materials. Teachers having just taught a level can make their work available to others who follow. And teachers reteaching the same level can preserve their work intact, leaving it available to improve on the next time around, possibly by making use of the work of others, similarly preserved and available.

Sophisticated approaches are required to manage the plethora of materials being produced at our institution. Our teachers have devised a system that entails embedding a label in a document, such as a "remark" in HTML code, for example, or as invisible white text on white background in a document. The label string is then searched for, using AltaVista Discovery (1998), configured to search on the local server. When Discovery identifies target documents, they can be clicked on and launched just like any document targeted by a search engine on the Web. For example, a search requesting Discovery to show any hypertext markup language (HTML) documents containing the string *indirect object* will kick out several exercises produced by teachers and stored in their folders on the MLI server.

Almost Seamless Interface

As teachers and students work in an environment where computers are available throughout the facility, we hope that eventually their use will become truly seamless, that teachers and students will simply reach for the nearest computer to solve whatever problems arise at appropriate junctures throughout a normal workday, and think it no more unusual than switching on a VCR to extract the data from a videotape. Indeed, the facility strives to make computers so ubiquitous that their use is taken for granted, ensuring that there is less focus on the computer and more on the language being taught. We are finding that, given the degree of receptiveness shown by our teachers to the potential inherent in this environment, technological constraints (e.g., slow network throughput, hard disks that fill up, memory limitations, and things that go wrong with the machines) are more of an impediment than misconceptions about how the technology should be used. Indeed, our teachers

are adapting to their high-tech setting in more ways than we anticipated when we planned the facility, ways that continue to inform, amaze, and surprise us.

PRACTICAL IDEAS

The UAE has made a considerable outlay of funds for this facility, largely on faith, and much is made of the fact that our concentration on technology is what makes us unique, particularly in the UAE. However, several important aspects of the MLI experience can be applied in a more modestly funded setting.

Tailor the Physical Surroundings

Ensure small class sizes appropriate to the communicative approach, and design furniture to match pedagogical requirements.

Offer Seamless Access

CALL development to meet teaching and learning goals should proceed on the principle that the more seamless the access to computers, the more apt they are to be used in innovative ways. Design the facility to place computers at the fingertips of teachers and students wherever and whenever they might want to use them so that each success breeds others and the question becomes not whether to use technology, but how.

Proceed in Understandable Steps

Introduce technology as users are able to handle it. One way is to begin with text manipulation, where the interface of technology with pedagogy can be clearly understood. Allow teachers and students to move at their own pace into the wider context of interactive multimedia and the Web.

Encourage Teacher Collaboration

To facilitate teacher-produced presentations and exercises, all instructors should have home pages. Encourage teachers to query each other often by setting up an e-mail forum for that purpose. Hold regular seminars to permit teachers to share their technology and Web-based discoveries.

Keep the Curriculum Focused on Language Learning

Do not create a separate computer curriculum, in which discrete computer skills are taught in a graded manner at the various levels in a track parallel to a separate language curriculum. There should be only a language curriculum, into which computer skills are introduced on an ad hoc basis. Microsoft PowerPoint, for example, could be introduced to a Level 1 class, teaching them just enough about the tool for them to be able to accomplish the pedagogical objective. The problem with this approach, as pointed out by colleagues, is that students might progress through the program with a hodgepodge of skills, so that a teacher in Level 4 who wants his students to use PowerPoint may have some students who have had prior experience with the program and others who have never touched it. It can be argued that this

would happen anyway, as students might test into Level 4 without having even heard of Microsoft PowerPoint, and students in Level 1 may have used Microsoft PowerPoint previously at home or at work.

Create a setting in which teachers regard the computer as a tool, not as a novelty, by helping them build their skills in CALL through well-informed practice, with the best tools for the jobs at hand readily available. All should bear in mind that the ultimate focus of the job is language learning, not the tools of technology, however useful and creative they may be.

Engage in Informed Practice

To overcome the desire for a separate computer curriculum:

- ESL institutions must train their teachers in how to promote pedagogy through technology use.
- Teachers, in turn, must create easy to follow step-by-step instructions to get students started with the software they need to accomplish the learning tasks and keep them focused on those tasks. With language students, the approach should not be, “Today we’re going to learn to create a home page,” to which the students are likely to reply, “We’ve already done that, teacher.” Rather the approach should be, “Today we’re going to describe our lives and interests. Let’s see what tools we have that will help us to communicate what we want to say about ourselves.”

◆ CONCLUSION

The MLI was developed in order to provide a motivating and technology-rich environment for UAE military personnel requiring intensive study in English. Although the relationship between technology and language learning pedagogy is young, it appears that everyone involved in the development at MLI realizes benefits. Students benefit by learning about computers while learning language. Teachers seem keen on learning about and utilizing the technology to help their students, and on pushing its development to the limits of their capability. And the administrators of the program must feel it is working, as they are financing not only the expansion of our program but also the application of our model to language learning facilities elsewhere in the Emirates. Meanwhile, MLI strives to become an ideal language learning facility with a curriculum enhanced through appropriate and intelligent use of technology.

◆ CONTRIBUTOR

Vance Stevens is CALL coordinator for Amideast’s UAE/MLI Project. He was recently director of ESL software design at Courseware Publishing International, and spent 20 years working with computers while teaching ESL in the Middle East, Hawaii, and Texas. He has engaged in numerous CALL-related research projects and has been published widely in the field.