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Evaluating Computer-Assisted Language Learning: An Integrated Approach to Effectiveness Research in CALL (review)

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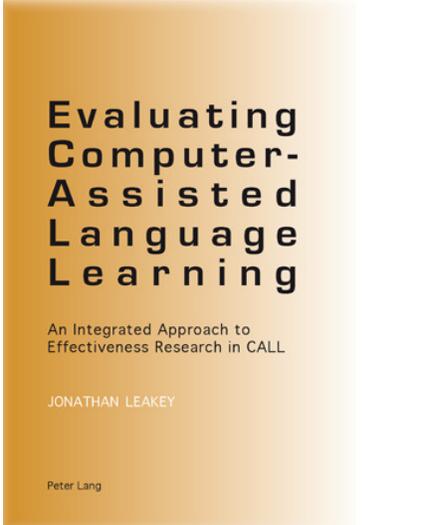# REVIEW OF *EVALUATING COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH IN CALL*

Evaluating Computer-Assisted Language Learning: An Integrated Approach to Effectiveness Research in CALL

Jonathan Leakey

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Peter Lang
Bern, Switzerland

Review by Deborah Crusan, Wright State University

Since its inception, the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has suffered from skeptics questioning whether technology and multimedia have anything to add to language learning. These uncertainties clearly illustrate a need for a comprehensive evaluative model of CALL. In *Evaluating Computer-Assisted Language Learning: An Integrated Approach to Effectiveness Research in CALL*, Jonathan Leakey asks readers to consider important matters about the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). His purpose for the book centers on gathering evidence for the computer's impact on language learning. He argues for an integrated approach to the evaluation of CALL and constructs a prototype for evaluating what he refers to as the *three Ps*: platform, programs, and pedagogy. Leakey espouses a philosophy that data collection should be for improvement of the three Ps rather than valuing data and technology for their own sakes—"as an end in themselves" (p. 7). He asks the question: Can CALL make a difference in language learning?

The first five chapters of the book are highly theoretical, justifying the need for such a study, providing an in-depth review of the literature as well as an identification of the gaps in CALL effectiveness research, and offering a "prototype for evaluation CALL" (p. 132). Chapter 1 remains true to its title—*The need for systematic quality control in CALL*. In it, the author begins by building a case for systematicity. He then provides an overview of studies and sets down seven foundational research questions. These questions are followed by an overview of data collection methods, the experimental design models used in the study, and a breakdown of the remaining eight chapters of the book.

Chapter 2 establishes Leakey's familiarity with the field and his awareness of the key issues. In *Swings, spirals, and reincarnations: Lessons from the past*, the author defines CALL, summarizes CALL acronyms, and provides a thorough analysis of past studies and approaches. He then provides a brief history of CALL pedagogy followed by a discussion of Blended CALL, or blended learning, weighing both the advantages and disadvantages of such a methodology. He then introduces platforms and programs and lays out questions to be answered including "whether software that incorporates a blend of technologies and is driven by a hotchpotch of language learning or none can be equally as effective as, or even more effective than, software that is rigidly subservient to the dictates of one particular theory" (p.

56).

Chapter 3 presents evidence of CALL's effectiveness and discusses the four debates in CALL: the improvement debate, the comparison debate, the configuration debate, and the outcome vs. processes debate. Each of these debates concerns the effectiveness of CALL. Leakey points out that these debates have been and are still important to CALL and will determine future directions in CALL.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the most daunting. In them, Leakey offers his model for evaluating CALL. Chapter 4 offers CALL enhancement criteria and includes an evaluation flow-chart; the chart lists the twelve criteria for evaluation of CALL enhancement, which he explains as an addition to Chapelle's (2001) six criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of CALL. The chapter also compares and contrasts the work of scholars such as Chapelle and Dunkel. Chapter 5 outlines both qualitative and quantitative measures for evaluation and explores the concept of validity. Once again, data collection methods are outlined and methods for reporting the data are summarized.

The next three chapters, 6, 7, & 8, offer evaluative models for the three Ps of platforms, programs, and pedagogy through case studies whose "overarching goal is to see how one 'P' relates to and interacts with the others and see if there is a synergy at work" (p. 133). In Chapter 6, Leakey examines courses that used digital platforms at The University of Ulster and University of Portsmouth. Leakey concludes that while it is difficult to compare the Robotel and Melissi systems because the "degree and manner of integration" (p. 164) vary, the project was instructive in that it aided in elucidating criteria by which to evaluate the platforms. Chapter 7 discusses two generations of the TellMeMore language learning software package, comparing features and carefully delineating the steps of the investigation. Chapter 8 outlines the application of Leakey's Model for Evaluation (MFE) to two projects, Technology and Oral Language Development (TOLD) and BILINGUA, and to various other approaches: behaviorist, communicative, constructivist, and blended pedagogies.

The final chapter (Chapter 9) presents MFE$_2$, a new framework for evaluating CALL. Leakey refers to this as an end-product in the form of evaluative frameworks represented in this chapter as 12 different tables listing criteria such as learner fit, authenticity, practicality, learner control, and error correction and feedback. The author states that these tables "should provide the evaluator with a clear idea of the quality of CALL provision, resources, and adherence to principles of pedagogy" (p. 278). Finally, the author sets up a proposed timeline for a CALL evaluation as well as tables cataloguing research design criteria, data collection methods, and a validity checklist. In the end, Leakey concludes, "This study has been less about justifying CALL…than about how best to evaluate CALL in a range of contexts, using a variety of resources, and delivered via a number of different teaching approaches" (p. 289). His ultimate goal is "to add credibility to the body of evidence for CALL's effectiveness" (p. 289).

Flaws in the manuscript are few and relatively minor. For one, the prose is dense and, at times, difficult to read, especially with the number of tables included. Deciphering the immense amount of information included takes careful reading and a great deal of time to interpret results. Regardless of these fairly insignificant shortcomings, the book offers a comprehensive model for CALL evaluation and the tools to perform those evaluations and on the whole, signals CALL's coming of age.

Many can benefit from reading this book. Certainly anyone who is interested in research in CALL will find the topic meticulously researched; further, those who are considering investing in expensive digital equipment to expedite computer-assisted language learning would do well to carefully study Leakey's framework for evaluation of CALL. Lastly, software developers will find Leakey's book informative to aid in improvement and further development of CALL software. The research embodied in *Evaluating Computer-Assisted Language Learning: An Integrated Approach to Effectiveness Research in CALL* is important in that, besides meticulously researching the field and offering insight into the many questions about CALL's importance, it raises new questions about the future of CALL research and opens the door for new studies.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Deborah Crusan is Professor of TESOL/Applied Linguistics at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, USA. Her research interests include assessment for placement of second language writers, the machine scoring of essays, and the politics of assessment. Her book, *Assessment in the Second Language Writing Classroom*, was published in 2010 by the University of Michigan Press.

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