Call Activity

LING 526 Assignment 3

Jacob Larsen

Iowa State University

Spring 2006
Introduction

Since its inception in the 1960s computer assisted language learning (CALL) has continuously developed and evolved. This has been particularly evident over the last 15 years or so where the technological advances have taken great strides and where the theory and methodology behind CALL has developed and matured considerably (Chapelle, 2001).

An event in particular, which has had great influence on CALL, is the advent of the World Wide Web or Internet. Suddenly, distribution of and access to EFL and ESL material became a lot easier and cheaper. Moreover, the technologies of email and synchronous and asynchronous chat prompted a reevaluation of what it meant to have communicative competence and be literate in a foreign language as well as they broadened the possibilities for building and practicing these aspects of a foreign language (Blake, 2000; Braine, 2004; Chapelle, 2001; Fotos, 2004; Pennington, 2004; Taylor & Gitsaki, 2004).

As online materials have developed and the possibilities have increased so have the theoretical and methodological concerns regarding their construction, use and evaluation (Chapelle, 1998, 2001). Therefore, this paper seeks to describe and evaluate an online CALL activity according to the guidelines and criteria set forth by Chapelle (1998, 2001). The activity focuses on teaching high-intermediate and advanced learners of English how to understand American housing ads. Below, the learners and the activity is described in more detail and evaluated according to Chapelle’s (2001) principles for a judgmental evaluation of CALL tasks. Whenever relevant, aspects of Chapelle’s (1998) seven hypotheses for the development of multimedia CALL are also considered.
Learner Description

The activity described below aims to teach high-intermediate and advanced learners of English how to understand American housing ads. The main target group is members of the international community at Iowa State University, more specifically graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and faculty. These learners need not be participating in any formal language teaching program as the material is intended for self-study as part of a larger set of instructional materials dealing with the topic of buying a home in the United States.

Activity Description

The activity is, as mentioned above, part of a larger unit on the topic of buying a house in the United States. More specifically, the task centers on the understanding of housing ads for apartments and houses. The task is divided into three parts in order to best integrate aspects of Chapelle’s (1998) “Seven Hypotheses Relevant for Developing Multimedia CALL” (p. 23).

In part 1 (see Figure 1) the learner must match four persons’ or couples’ wishes for a home with 10 housing ads in order to identify the four ads that best meet the needs and wishes of the four descriptions. In order to help the learners understand the many abbreviations in the housing ads, each abbreviation is linked to a gloss with the full word, which appears in the right-hand frame when the learner clicks a link. The learners indicate their answers by choosing the name or names of the person or couple from a menu next to each ad. When the learner has attempted to match all four persons or couples he or she continues to the next set of exercises.
Figure 1: The learner must match four persons’ or couples’ wishes for a home with 10 housing ads in order to identify the four ads that best meet the needs and wishes of the people.

In part 2, the five exercises require the learner to read a housing ad and write out the full text of the ad, without abbreviations. During this and the final activity the glosses are not available. The learner writes his answer in a text area below each ad, as can be seen in Figure 2, and submits his or her answer after each ad.
After the fifth ad has been translated or written out, the learner must continue to part 3 and read three detailed housing listings adapted from the homepage of a local realtor. After each listing, the learner must write an ad including all essential information from the listing and submit his or her answer before being presented with the next listing. Figure 3 shows an example of this. After the third listing, the learner is presented with his or her own answers and the correct answers to each exercise in order to be able to compare the two.
Match the person or persons below with the correct house or apartment. Click on the blue, underlined expressions in the ads to get the full word or explanation on the right. When you are done, click SUBMIT below the ads.

**Listing 3**

**Figure 3:** The learner must write an ad with all of the essential information from the listing in abbreviated form.

**Task Analysis**

According to Chapelle (2001, p. 54) a judgmental analysis “should examine characteristics of the software and task in terms of criteria drawn from research on SLA.” She herself suggests six criteria which will be used in the following analysis.

**Language learning potential**

The main issue for language learning potential is “the extent to which the task promotes beneficial focus on form” (Chapelle, 2001). The housing ad activity discussed here provides a
focus on form with respect to several of the criteria mentioned. Whereas the activity concentrates on the teaching of vocabulary, focus on form is included to the extent that learners are presented with the specific genre of housing ads and are able to practice how to read and write them. More specifically, the task in part 1 engages the learner in interactional modification via the glossing feature. Thus, when they click an abbreviation in an ad they interact with the software and are presented with modified input to aid their understanding of it. This, in turn, brings up the issue of saliency: Chapelle (1998) points out that effective input enhancement aids the learner’s noticing of linguistic input and plays an important role in making unknown target language forms into known and used forms. Likewise, it helps the learners comprehend the semantic aspects of the input, another important aspect mentioned by Chapelle (1998).

In addition to this, we may add that the task as a whole provides the learners with a safe, low-stakes, practice environment without time pressure. Finally, it should be pointed out that the final page of the exercise (task still to be added), in which the learners can compare their answers to model answers provided by the author, offers opportunity for them to notice errors in their output and modify it accordingly, which is an important and desirable feature in CALL materials according to Chapelle (1998).

**Learner fit**

Considering that the intended learners are international graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and faculty who are using the material because they are actively seeking information about the process of buying a home in the United States, it seems safe to assume that it will meet a perceived need and that the learners will be motivated and interested in using it. Some learners may be familiar with the most common abbreviations in housing ads but considering the amount
of expressions covered, there should be enough unknown material for a majority of the learners to be able to develop.

**Meaning focus**

Meaning focus is clearly addressed in this task. Learners use the target language glosses to decode, construct, and interpret the meaning of the housing ads and subsequently translate authentic realtor listings into housing ads. Thus, the learners’ primary attention is directed towards the meaning of the language required to complete the task. This also promotes purposeful construction and interpretation of meaning. As a result of this, learners are provided with “opportunities to produce target language output” which is also stressed by Chapelle (1998) as important in a CALL task.

**Authenticity**

While it is difficult for most language tasks to meet or fulfill all of the criteria set up by Chapelle (2001), this criteria is clearly addressed in this task. Throughout the task, learners work with authentic housing ads and realtor listings and carry out tasks that directly correspond to what will be required of them if they want to buy a house or apartment or list one for rent or sale. This, in turn, should promote learner interest and willingness to participate.

**Positive impact**

To some extent, one might claim that this task will teach the learners about the target culture. For sure, it will help them integrate into US culture by helping them find a good place to live and therefore will probably also have a beneficial effect upon their quality of life in the US.
However, it is difficult to point to any strategies for language learning that learners might acquire through the use of this activity. It should, however, be possible for instructors to observe appropriate second language pedagogical practices through the use of this task. The use of input enhancement and the modification of target language input rests on sound theoretical foundations that have proven to be beneficial to learning (Chapelle, 1998).

Due to the technical simplicity of the task, learners and teachers are likely to have a positive experience using the activity and material in class. However, it is important to point out that this material is intended for self-study and therefore does not need to be administered or introduced by a teacher.

**Practicality**

Due to the simplicity of the task, and its limited demands upon software and hardware (almost any internet-enabled computer and browser will work) it seems unlikely that learners will face any problems using it. The software is meant to be housed on a server together with the other instructional material that makes up the unit on learning how to buy a house or apartment in the US. For example, the ISU Housing Office might host this material. Considering that explicit direction on how to do the exercises will be included with the material, no serious usability problems are to be expected.

**Conclusion**

When analyzing a CALL task, it is important to carry out both judgmental and empirical analyses. The judgmental analysis of this task generally presents a positive picture. It is therefore likely that the task will result in learning when carried out by the target audience. It is, however,
not possible to predict anything about the magnitude of this predicted learning which is why an empirical analysis of this task is also needed. Only with data from these two types of analysis can the linguist or language teacher claim with relative confidence that the task results in the type of learning it is intended for.
Bibliography


