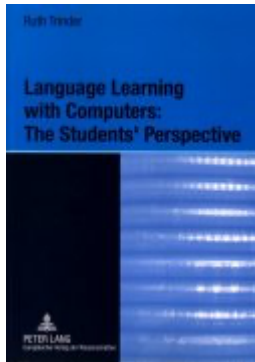


## Book Review

### ***Language Learning with Computers: The Students' Perspective***

#### ***A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation***



Trinder, Ruth (2006)

*Language Learning with Computers: The Students' Perspective*  
*A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation*

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As its subtitle suggests, this book is a doctoral thesis consisting of "a theoretical and empirical investigation", covering both the practical and theoretical sides of the research topic at hand. This topic is Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) from the point of view of the learner's perception and actual use. In trying to establish an empirically-based (as well as theoretically-grounded) connection between CALL, individual differences of the students and other contextual variables, the scope of the work in fact embraces the entire language learning process, in this particular case through technology and within a given context. Therefore, it is not surprising that the book deals with a wide range of disciplines and research concerns, partly because the fields of Individual Differences, within Second Language Acquisition (SLA), on the one hand, and CALL, on the other hand, are among the most multidisciplinary areas of the language learning and teaching domain. And it does so thoroughly and in depth, which is a very welcome achievement. That is why the author considers her research as being interdisciplinary and integrative in nature.

As stated in the preface, the book departs from the overarching pedagogical premise that any teaching approach should tend to adapt to the students' individual learning styles and preferences, as well as being contextually appropriate. This is easier said than done, so one of the author's main objectives throughout the book is to discover the intricacies of the multifaceted links between CALL materials, individual students and the learning context. In Trinder's words, "the aim, in broadest terms, is to investigate not the causes, but the effects of integrating CALL in the (...) curriculum" (p. 9). Needless to say, such a difficult task must be carried out with a given learning context in mind. Ambitious as this aim may seem, the author of the thesis manages very successfully to draw a comprehensive and fully informative picture of how learners of a particular pedagogical context perceive, use and take advantage of CALL, as well as what individual differences and contextual issues bear an influence on the students' uptake of this type of technology-based language learning. But this is not the only merit of the book, since, to my view, it also, and especially, demonstrates a solid research methodology that can be followed in future investigations with the aim of studying the efficiency of CALL from the learner's standpoint. In other words, although the thesis, on one level, analyses the implementation of a specific CALL application with specific students in a particular and clearly depicted environment or context, on another more abstract level, it also serves as a model to conduct similar research efforts that take the students' perspective into account. This is, as far as we know, a very appealing innovation of the study. Indeed, not much research work has been conducted with such

a broad scope and in such an exhaustive manner within the field of Individual Differences in CALL. It is, then, very interesting to find a study dealing with CALL that takes the student's views into account.

Still within the topic of the research methodology applied in this study, two important aspects are worth being mentioned. Firstly, the whole book is a good example of how to establish a two-way link between theory and practice. This feature makes it interesting both for the theoretical researcher (in various fields, such as SLA, Psychology or Educational Technology) and for the language learning practitioner or other types of practical researcher. The author draws upon Ellis' belief that both the theoretical issues and the pedagogical practical concerns are relevant in bridging the gap between SLA and Language Pedagogy, and that the former can to some extent illuminate (rather than be directly applied to) the latter (Ellis 1992). As a result of this mutual and influential relationship between theory and practice, the reader can find theoretical models together with experimental studies and pedagogical reflections. Secondly, the work clearly establishes the research parameters and coherently discusses research methodological issues of prime importance, such as validity, error margins, sample sizes, statistical methods or interpretation pitfalls, to mention but a few. The result is a solid research study that is well justified and draws relevant conclusions.

From the earliest stages in the history of CALL, computers and related technologies have been suggested as suitable and efficient tools in order to achieve a high degree of individualization in language learning and teaching, as well as to provide the ideal match between teaching methods and individual differences (learners' styles and preferences). Nevertheless, such a claim has very seldom been supported (or contradicted) by empirical results and sound research studies. This fact represents an important gap in existing CALL research literature, and this book no doubt contributes to filling this gap. Nonetheless, according to the author, more research is needed to offer deeper insights of the presumed capability of CALL to meet the requirements of individual students in a better way than, say, other conventional teaching and learning environments. Then, it can be said that the book does not take for granted certain statements and pedagogical conclusions that could be regarded as gratuitous or not sufficiently proven by relevant research. Other examples such statements are: "the learner that is put in front of self-access learning technologies is automatically supposed to become an autonomous learner" or "the fact that a given (help) facility is available in a CALL application means that the student will use it (efficiently)". Among many others, these commonplace claims are under close scrutiny in this book, and the results of some of its investigations often make us notice an unfortunate mismatch between, for instance, certain CALL features and the actual use and perception of such features by the language learners, i.e. the end-users of the software.

The book is divided into four distinct sections, followed by an extensive Bibliography and an Appendix containing the research questionnaires used throughout the book. The first section consists of a preface and three short parts called Overview, where the contents of the following three chapters are summarised, Research questions, including the main hypothesis and questions to guide the research, and Methodology, where the research methods and tools are listed and explained.

The following section, entitled PART 1: Research into Individual Differences includes a comprehensive review of the research literature concerning learners' individual differences and other related areas within Second Language Acquisition, such as learning styles. The reported themes, findings and theoretical models are at all times interpreted in the light of the research focus of the thesis, rather than merely incorporated to the discussion in a neutral way, which is a strong point of the book, given the great amount of information provided. This critical revision represents a solid base to inform the development of the empirical part of the study later on.

This theoretical background is further developed in PART 2: CALL and its theoretical context. This deals with CALL and what this relatively new area and its feeder disciplines can contribute to the analysis of the given learning context, i.e. the implementation of a piece of CALL in tertiary education with real students of English for Business Purposes. The section discusses a number of issues. Firstly, the theoretical background of CALL research is presented. Secondly, the relationships between theory and pedagogy, on the

one hand, and between SLA and CALL are dealt with, since this part conceptualizes some relevant ideas derived from acquisition studies from the point of view of technology-based language learning (CALL). Third, some aspects in relation with theoretically-based CALL development are studied. Consideration is also given to broader contextual issues in CALL environments, such as task characteristics or individual differences within this type of learning. Finally, the chapter discusses some key objectives and targets within the research agenda of this discipline. Therefore, parts 1 and 2 of the book, in an accumulative way provide the theoretical basis which the rest of the thesis is built upon. This structure clearly illustrates the close connection between theory and practice mentioned above.

These theoretical considerations lead to the final section, PART 3: Empirical research, which includes 10 empirical studies conducted in order to draw a comprehensive picture of language learning through technology (and also in face-to-face environments) from the point of view of the individual learners in a given context. This context is a University setting with students of English for Business Studies during two semesters, with two pieces of CALL software called *OEM 1* and *OEM 2*, specifically developed for this context and these particular students. Before conducting the empirical studies, the author collects findings from Parts 1 and 2 and draws them together in order to design and inform the studies. These studies investigate the role of learner-internal and learner-external factors in the use and perception of CALL by the learners. Since theoretical aspects relating to individual differences deriving from SLA and CALL have previously been put into practice in order to develop the CALL programmes, some of the empirical studies also shed light on the appropriateness and efficiency of the CALL products, from the point of view of their adaptation to those individual differences. To this end, the thesis also addresses the suitability of some pedagogical features of the CALL software in terms of learner variables. On the other hand, great care is taken in constructing the research method, with the establishment of fairly focused and comprehensive research questions, and the related tools, mainly consisting of *ad hoc* questionnaires, as well as interviews and screen recordings. It must be said that the research section is not limited to CALL, since the specific classroom environment of the experiment is also carefully analysed. The empirical section concludes with the interpretation of the results and, what is more, with the proposal of a theoretical model that accounts for the role of learners' individual and other contextual variables in the perception and use of a blended language learning environment (i.e. combining CALL and face-to-face instruction) from the students' perspective, and also, ultimately, to prove the viability of such a blended environment to integrate a learner's variables and differences. The importance of incorporating this theoretical model lies in the fact that it can integrate a number of other similar research efforts, studies and actions.

The book contains such a wealth of information from such a variety of sources that it sometimes becomes difficult for the reader to fully process and handle the interpretations and conclusions offered. This sometimes makes reading the book a complex process, despite its coherent structure and articulate discourse. Not surprisingly, the book is the result of a great amount of time devoted to the theoretical review and investigations carried out by the author. Thus, the effort that the non-specialist reader has to make to follow certain parts of the book can by no means be considered as a weak point. The author herself acknowledges the density and magnitude of the research topics covered throughout the book. She also recognises some weak points in the research, such as the small sample of some of the empirical studies, which is a disadvantage in terms of validity, or the difficulty to interpret some contradictory results in certain studies included in Part 3. In addition to this, the only thing that we miss in the book is a more detailed pedagogical description of the CALL application (including its structure and features). It can be argued that this description could be outside the scope of the research topic; nevertheless, such a description could have clarified some issues in relation to CALL design features from the point of view of the learners' individual differences.

If we take a look at the book as a whole, it carries out a global scrutiny of the language learning process within a specific CALL (as well as blended-learning) environment, with an in-depth, comprehensive and enlightening investigation that ranges from the very first action of considering relevant theoretical issues to the final stages of CALL

implementation, use and evaluation, through a number of key intermediate phases, such as the theoretically-informed development of CALL materials or the assessment of the learners' profile and the contextual background. It is certainly a very pleasant experience to find studies of such a broad scope and, simultaneously, with such a coherent research methodology embedded in CALL literature.

**Reference**

Ellis, R. (1992) *Second Language Acquisition and Language Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

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