# Developing learner autonomy through computer-assisted language learning (CALL)

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Introduction:

Most students in the Japanese university system are required to study English as a foreign language. While the majority would acknowledge the value of foreign language learning, few feel any compelling reasons to really apply themselves to the task. For many, success in foreign language learning remains an elusive goal, beyond their personal control. It is therefore a challenge for the language-learning program to afford students control of the learning process. Thus, fostering learners' sense of agency, throughout the very long and demanding task of language acquisition, should be a priority in language teaching as it is a prerequisite for success. The following study evaluates CALL courseware, as a medium of instruction undertaken independently in order to promote autonomous learning (and less dependency on a teacher). I will argue that a well-designed CALL program can support and extend the classroom learning experience by giving learners a concrete reason to use English outside the classroom.

## 1. Instructed Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999) express the need for a pedagogical framework to support CALL. The following section looks at several theoretical issues for CALL: a) the interactive hypothesis in CALL environments, b) the notion of authenticity, c) a main insight of interlanguage pragmatics, and d) autonomous learning as a course goal and finally, e) the implications for addressing motivation. Then, the section following that will provide an analysis of the Smart Choice CD-ROM package (Oxford University Press) and finally I will sum up with conclusions.

### 1.1 Interaction

SLA theory states that the processes that trigger the noticing of form and function require interaction, so well described by Gass (1997, cited in Chapelle, 2005). In interaction, learners notice language form and function (ie. Meaning) in rich communicative contexts. Importantly for CALL skeptics, the interaction hypothesis is not limited in application to face-to-face interactions

(Chapelle, 2005). "Interaction can also take place in the mind" (Ellis 1999, cited in Chapelle (2005). This occurs "when we engage in the kind of 'private speech' (Ellis, 1999, p. 2) as the mind interacts in relation to some phenomena (ibid). The following features promote interaction Chapelle (2005):

- Key linguistic items are made salient.
- The user must be able to modify input.
- The software must provide opportunities for output.
- The software provides opportunities for learners to notice their errors.
- There are opportunities for users to correct their linguistic output.

1.2. Authenticity in CALL & the instructional context

Chapelle (1999) argues that "a classroom task should be compared with an out-of-class speech event through an analysis of multiple relevant task features" (p. 115). Such speech events are described by Halliday (1977; 1989 cited in Chapelle, 1999) as follows: goal driven speech acts, processes, topic, duration and location. Speech acts of this kind are characteristically complex. The rich contextual support cannot easily be discounted. A speech act in such a context consists of

- The act of producing an utterance
- The choices involved in phrasing an utterance in language
- What effect you intend to have on the person you address

(Barron, 2003)

CALL environments need to feature contextual support to compensate for this lack of 'authentic' contextual phenomena, which are a taken-for-granted feature of real-world speech events. The more-complex the language environment is, the more likely it is to trigger a deeper kind of analysis on the part of the reader.

Getting learners to engage in language at this level of authenticity requires creating the conditions for meaningful interaction however at a manageable level. Authenticity should be understood as descriptive of learning environments with rich contextual support but also as tasks that involve the learner in using language to achieve specific real-world-like objectives. As task-based language teaching (TBLT) advocates have noted, the role of language learning materials is to feature, or make salient, specific language objectives and provide hints (ie. streamlined contextual support) as to what

linguistic choices will lead to success on the task. Native speaker like language contexts in contrast are overly complex in many ways and would otherwise overwhelm the learner.

1.3. Interlanguage pragmatic issues in CALL

In communicative language teaching (CLT), establishing a low-anxiety environment is a main priority so that learners can willingly engage materials and learn from their mistakes. Norton (2000) however has criticized the way the affective filter has been theorized in SLA theory. She suggests that it needs to be understood, not exclusively as a personality trait under the learner's control but rather a result also of negative evaluation as learners are sensitive to being corrected (Barron, 2003). Since language acquisition can only occur when learners notice the input, it makes sense at a beginner level to increase the possibility for noticing in a low anxiety environment.

That is not to say that all CALL software will necessarily provide a low-anxiety environment. Therefore it is necessary for the TESOL instructor to evaluate the software under consideration for contextual support and the above-mentioned features. Not just any software. Chapelle, (1988 in Bradin, 1999,) says: "… the student must take pleasure working through it" (p. 166). The interface therefore must be efficient, aesthetically appealing, and practical.

1.4. Encouraging autonomy through accreditation

The Smart Choice software is designed to be used outside the classroom thus encouraging learner autonomy. As indicated in Healey (1999), this allows students to learn in their own time and receive accreditation.

The details of the progress scores provide a way of identifying which specific language features are problem areas. Students may experience difficulty with a) misunderstanding instructions, b) the language item.

Accreditation and training

- Fixed content and evaluation
- negotiated time and sequence
- fixed content and evaluation

The scoreboard records learners' first and latest scores. These are printed and recorded by the

teacher. The details of the scores provide a way of identifying problem areas.



Figure 1. The printable scoreboard showing task type and results.

1.5. Motivation and CALL

Johnston (1999) points out that we must look at individuals, rather than the classroom atmosphere as a whole, to understand effective motivational teaching practices. Specific CALL software allows for peak individual performance away from a peer group, which may or may not attach any relevance to the study of foreign language. This encourages optimum performance as CALL recognizes individual achievements.

Optimum performance utilizes a specific type of motivation, one, which allows learners, as individuals, to take risks. This is a condition somewhere between negative stress and boredom, ie, it is a heightened state of consciousness. "...to maximize positive stress, activities need to have clear rules and clear goals, offer rapid feedback, be clearly delineated, allow the students to feel in control, and, above all, have a purpose (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991 cited in Johnson, 1999, p. 340). In conclusion, motivation relates to CALL tasks at the levels of, accreditation, recognition, and complexity.

2. Software evaluation: in the context of instructional goals
The three level Smart Choice course materials consists of:

- Teachers book

- Teachers resource book (photocopiable activities)

- Student book (with packaged CDROM designed for self study)

- Classroom Audio CDs

- Student workbook

- Companion website: games and karaoke

- Comprehensive test package

Each CALL unit features:

- vocabulary tasks,

- grammar tasks,

- conversation tasks,

- video listening tasks.

2.1 Instructor technical needs and limitations:

Students had access to computers on campus between the hours of 8:30 and 7:00 pm. Many students chose to use their own personal computers.

2.1.1 Operating system

The software works on Windows and Macintosh. It does not require installation. It runs in full screen mode.

2.2. Instructional goals of the course were

- To evaluate CALL as a medium of instruction

- To develop in learners an awareness of different ways of learning

- To develop learner autonomy and positively effect motivation

2.2.1 The course rationale and pedagogical principles

- CALL should increase functionality of the target language by extending the context of practice

- Create an 'evaluation friendly' environment for form-focused instruction

- Give students greater control over their grades

- To cater to different styles of learning

- Through accreditation, influence motivation to practice

## 2.3. Orientation

All students attended a CALL orientation in the college's computer room. It was a first time experience for all the learners. The orientation covered: each aspect of a given unit, interface overview, how to print the score-sheet, and retaking the unit.

### 2.3.1 The tutorial

Upon inserting the CDROM, students enter a user name. The user is then prompted to follow a short tutorial. The tutorial covers all the features of the main interface (as shown below). The tutorial takes students through a selection of the different activities and explains how to navigate the software. At anytime the user can switch into tutorial mode from the interface by clicking on HELP (indicated) on the interface. Learners tended to ignore the tutorial and went straight for the language exercises.

### 2.4 Analysis

The following evaluation looks at the grammar and video components of the software. As mentioned above, providing rich contextual support is an important aspect of the software's design so it is also a main feature of the analysis here. The tool decided on to analyze the software is based on Comer and Geissler (1998) as it combined linguistic, contextual and interface features for analysis. "In well-designed software, the technological interface becomes transparent and needs almost no conscious attention" (Bradin, 1999, p. 166). Chapelle, (1988 in Bradin, 1999,) says: " ⋯ the student must take pleasure working through it" (p. 166). The interface therefore must be efficient, aesthetically appealing, and practical. The CDROM worked seamlessly.

Table 1. An overview of software features

1. QUALITY

| | |
|---|---|
| appropriate vocabulary | Yes. |
| well written grammatically | Yes. |
| clearly stated objectives | Generally. |
| Modifiability | No. |

2. DEPTH

| | |
|---|---|
| Versatility ― | No. |
| Situating examples ― | Weak. Examples apply to task type, not language function. |
| Use of pictures for contextual support ― | Yes. |
| Feedback and mistakes ― | Limited. Does not accept variation in answers. Only shows correct or incorrect. |

3. INTERFACE

| | |
|---|---|
| changing answers before committing | Yes. |
| ease of use | Yes. |
| loading | Yes. |
| changing appearance | No. |

NAVIGATION

| | |
|---|---|
| menus | Clear. |
| help | Yes, but limited to general tutorial. |
| hints | tutorial based  (poor) |
| moving between exercise | Easy. |
| returning to an exercise | Easy. |

TEXT AND GRAPHICS

| | |
|---|---|
| consistent use of symbols | Yes. |
| clearly labeled | Yes. |
| duplication consistency | Good. |

SOUND

| | |
|---|---|
| recording and playback | Easy to control. |
| intelligibility | Clear. |
| quality of recording | Studio. |

| | |
|---|---|
| ability to navigate sound recording | Good. |
| accompanying transcript | Yes. (only after exercise has been attempted). |

INTERACTIVITY

| | |
|---|---|
| speech recognition | Yes, but not diagnostic. Basically a novelty. |
| help messages | Generic. |
| type of feedback | Limited to right and wrong. Also encouragement messages. |
| follow up explanations | No (but inappropriate for level). |

TEACHING FEEDBACK

| | |
|---|---|
| affords teacher insights into learners ? | Yes. Appropriate for the context. |

MANAGEMENT

| | |
|---|---|
| history | Adequate: tells first and latest information only. |
| user profile | Yes. |

SUPPORT

| | |
|---|---|
| annotate | No. |
| key word | Yes, but search is extremely slow. |
| tutorial | Yes. |
| pop up menus | No. |
| instructions | Yes. Generic tutorial on each task. |
| bilingual access | No. |

3.6 Application ? CALL's role as supporting learning goals in the classroom

The study also consisted of identifying problem areas, administering post-tests, and discussing difficulties. It was found that the software influenced the class positively in a number of ways (in spite of several shortcomings in the software) such that misunderstandings typically lead to a discussion of what went wrong and a greater sense of collaboration between teacher and learner.

The evaluation will first cover the video section of the software before turning to grammar. The classes met for 90 minutes 15 times during the semester; approximately 10 hours of CALL homework was involved.

3.6.1 An overview of scores.

Table 2. Semester one, (total = 21 students) level 1.

| Software assignment number | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Completion: Number of students to complete the assignment | 20 | 21 | 21 | 19 | 19 |
| Accreditation: Number of students to achieve full grade points on the assignment. | 15 | 12 | 15 | 16 | 15 |
| Average high scores | 38 / 40 | 37 / 40 | 38 / 41 | 37 /40 | 38 / 40 |
| Lowest high score | 31 | 31 | 20 | 35 | 27 |

* The low scores indicated here can be explained as that some students failed to complete a subsection of the unit assignment.

3.7. Analysis of video

Listening supports language learning more than any other skill at the beginner levels (Peterson, 2001). Speech is easier to comprehend when the learner has the benefit of non-verbal cues. Also, contextual elements such as scene, participants, back channeling, turn-taking etc. help contextualize meaning assisting the decoding process. Morley (1991) explains the pedagogical process of listening tasks in two parts: transferability means that listening input should lead to an output stage where learners use the input. Task orientation refers to the task of actually analyzing the language, i.e. noticing form and function in context. Unit three proved to be an excellent example here.

Ur (1984 cited in Hadley, 2001) notes that authentic video, in its complexity, can overwhelm the learner and frustrate the learning process. Real video footage does not necessarily provide the right kind of material for beginners whereas modified authentic material does even if multiple replays are possible. With beginners, it is far more important to offer features of language, marked for acquisition.

Thus the video here is carefully prepared and uncomplicated. There is no turn-taking, no back channel, no negotiation of input, no overlap of speech, and the linguistic items are restricted functionally and marked by careful speech. The Smart Choice begins with sound discrimination

tasks, which are ideal for beginners as they help learners deal with fast speech (Lynch and Mendelsohn 2002, cited in Nation & Newton, 2009). Sound discrimination tasks also help learners distinguish between word boundaries, check new lexicon items, and listen for words in context.

### 3.7.2. Introductory remarks

All tasks were clearly related to the course content and built on previous exercises.

|  |  | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| key | All monologues | undecided |
| setting | recorded in a studio | Clear / careful |
| participants | A number of ethnicities are represented but culturally all speakers are obviously westernized. | unsatisfactory |
| length | Each video script is approx. 100 words | very good |

Table 3: Video

A number of authors in SLA are now stressing the importance of instructional SLA that features cultural components that are not dominated by native speaker English models (Reeder, et al. 2004; Canagrarjah, 2005; Kashru, 1999; Pennycook, 2010). Considering the status of English in the world today, a wider variety of speakers and accents would have been a better critical choice.

Table 4: a breakdown of the video tasks in Level 1, units 2 through 5.

| topic | Unit 2 - jobs | Unit 3 - food | Unit 4 - keeping fit | Unit 5 - cell phone |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Video task 1 - (All tasks involved sound discrimination)Learners select 8 words they hear from a word a wide selection. | Adjectives: interesting  Jobs: | countable/ uncountable | activities: swimming | activities involving the use of cell phones |
| Video task 2 All multiple choice | true or false  Identifying speakers opinions | Identifying which speaker likes or dislikes a particular food. | Identifying factual tatements. The accurate use of adverbs of frequency. | Learners ability to Identify statements about speakers as true or false. |
| Does the task encourage deep processing? | Yes. | Yes. | No. | Yes. |
| Example input: | Gabby: "*I think a police officer is a dangerous job. My brother is a police officer, and he says it's very dangerous.*" | Sahil: "*Usually one of my favorite foods is pizza because it's cheap and fast and it can be made very easily.*" | Ken: "*I go to the gym three times a week to work out.*" | Sarah: "*I never use text messaging on my cell phone.*" |
| TASK: Example target structure from CALL task. | *Gabby thinks her brother has a dangerous job.* T / F | *Andrina and _____ like pizza.* | *Ken goes to the gym <u>once a</u> week.* | *Sarah always uses text messaging on her cell phone.* T / F |
| Are the structures useful? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| OVERALL EVALUATION OF VIDEO TASKS: a) language awareness b) using the language in new form. | Good.    a) yes    b) limited | * Excellent    a) yes    b) yes | Good.    a) yes    b) limited | Good.    a) yes    b) limited |

3.7.3. Video 3, a superlative beginner CALL task.
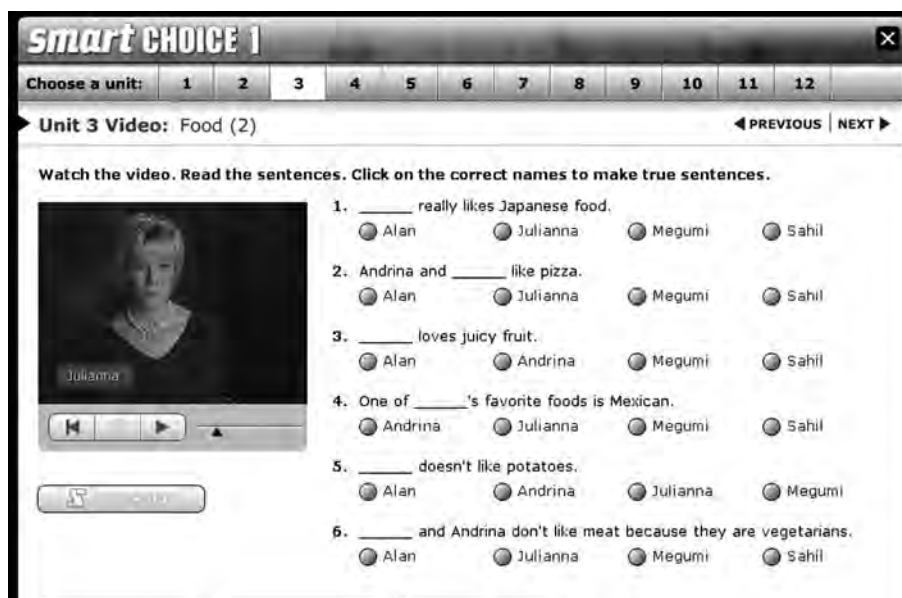


Figure 2: Video 3

Julianna, the first speaker, says:

> "*I love food. I love all kinds of food except meat. I'm a vegetarian. My favorite foods are Italian and Mexican.*"

Learners are therefore required to scan and locate Q4 as indicated by the arrow. Learners must then transfer the information into a new linguistic form. Julianna's monologue provides the input for responses 4 & 6. Both tasks require the reconfiguration of the linguistic input thus encouraging deep processing.

3.8. Grammar

The following is an evaluation of level 1, Unit 5 grammar, which is especially interesting because it proved problematic for learners.

Unit aims: Describing present activities.

Grammar: Control of present continuous

Unit 5 proved problematic for learners. Overall, the high-score results were excellent. However the Low-score results indicated that students experienced problems with the task. This lead to a diagnostic post-test to ascertain whether or not the task itself or the instructions were at fault. For convenience, I have generalized the results into three groups.

Table 5: a comparison of scores.

A 'careful' group had good scores. (7 students)

|  | Low score | High score |
|---|---|---|
| Grammar 1 | 7/8 | 8/8 |
| Grammar 2 | 7/8 | 8/8 |

A second group clearly misunderstood task 1. (7 students)

|  |  |  |
|---|---|---|
| Grammar 1 | 0/8 ← | 8/8 |
| Grammar 2 | 4/8 | 8/8 |

The third group had difficulty completing them accurately. (6 students)

|  |  |  |
|---|---|---|
| Grammar 1 | 4/8 | 8/8 |
| Grammar 2 | 4/8 | 8/8 |

Table 6: An individual example; Student － K, M. (July 22), Unit 5

| exercise | Language point | First score | High score |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vocabulary | Daily activities | 6/6 | 6/6 |
| * Grammar | Present continuous | 0/8 ← | 8/8 |
| Grammar | Present continuous | 7/8 | 8/8 |
| Conversation | What are you studying | 4/4 | 4/4 |
| Video | My cell phone | 7/8 | 8/8 |
| Video | My cell phone | 5/6 | 6/6 |

* We have to assume from this that the student did not have difficulty with the present continuous per se, but only with how it appeared in the CALL task.

Table 7: Unit 5 grammar consists of two activities as indicated below:

| Exercise | Language point | CALL task description | Example / comment |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Grammar 1 | Present continuous | Users type the correct form of the verb, which best describes the picture. (x8) | "jogging"(see figure below) |
| 2. Grammar 2 | Selective use of the present continuous in context. | Learner completes a text message by selecting the correct word (from drop down menu) | (see Figure below) |

The tasks.

In grammar: The present continuous (1), the instructions read: Type the －ing form of (the verb) as shown.
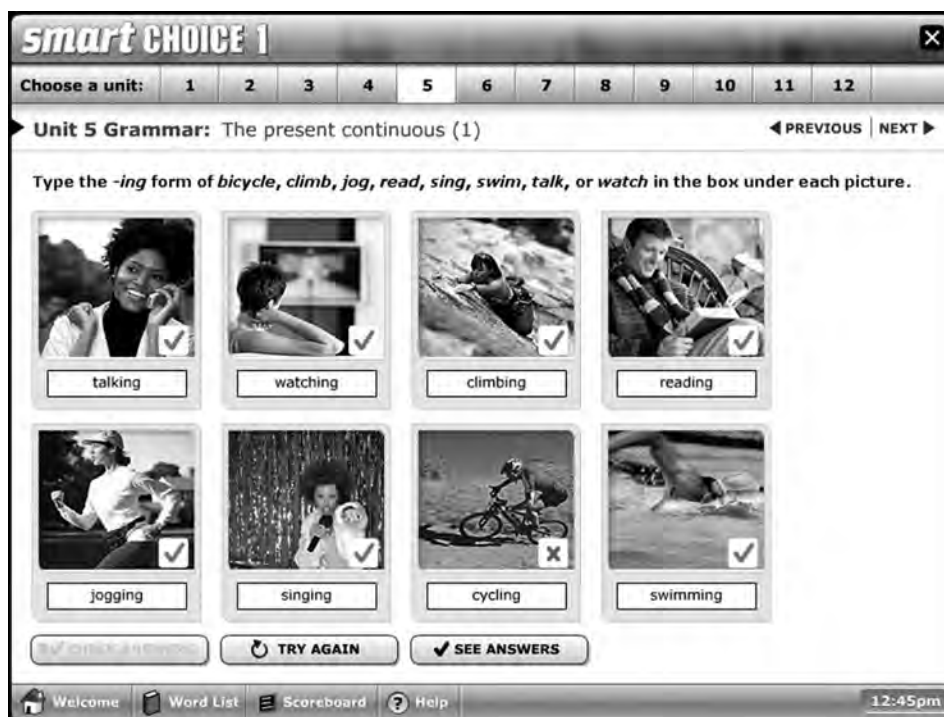


- Figure 3 - Unit five grammar task 1 - Note that the program does not accept alternative answers: "cycling".

3.8.2 Analysis - What went wrong?

- The preceding task exploited the simple present. This may have misled students into typing the simple form.
- In autonomous learning situations have to cope with the language instructions and the task. In the classroom, however, learners rely more on collaboration with other learners.
- The task itself assumed as level of competence on the language of instructions. Unfamiliar vocabulary; words such as "form" are lost on beginners.
- Being a generic example, the 'Help' tutorial was misleading. The example given was not related to this particular grammar task.

The task, in itself, was therefore ineffective in helping students identify how to use the present continuous in the context of naming activities. The task did however draw attention to other issues.

Conclusions

- The effectiveness of collaborative learning that needs to be compensated for in CALL software.
- Instructions are often ignored or misunderstood in which case students rely on guesswork.
- The importance of contextualizing a task.

Grammar: present continuous (2).

In this task students have to complete a text message by selecting the correct expression from a drop down menu. Results were also problematic. Upon investigation, Students admitted that they were unable to identify the type of discourse they were dealing with. The task therefore lacked discourse clues, in other words, the task lacked context.

Although this is obvious to the teacher, and given in the first line, upon closer inspection the discourse is very difficult to identify from a learners perspective. Several things made it difficult to identify it as a text message.

- It contains a salutation but it is not signed.
- Visually it does not look like a text message, so learners' schemata were not activated.
- The instructions fail to identify the what type of text it is.

There is the authenticity issue here too, which a brief discourse analysis can illustrate. The use of deixis in the line following the salutation clearly means that Joe, the addressee, is familiar with the anonymous writer's surroundings and close by, as the message includes a specific request that implies Joe is at hand

☐ "Hi, Joe! This place is boring."

☐ "Let's do something. Please!"

The rest of the message however gives the impression that Joe knows all the people the writer refers to, but doesn's know details about them. The reader of the message will notice that this sends a rather inauthentic message.



Figure 4: Grammar 2 - (A text message)

Solutions:

These above mentioned problems might have been avoided by clearer design formatting, an appropriate ending to the message, and a more authentic scenario.

It is difficult to say with conviction that these tasks helped students acquire the present continuous tense.

3.8.3. Diagnostic test

In language testing the concept of validity refers to a test that is able to elicit response from students that actually test what it is trying to test. If a teacher wants to find out if students know how to use the present progressive, for example. The test prompt therefore must be carefully written and this is where teachers have to be on guard. Packaged products do not necessarily achieve test validity. The following compares two test prompts, one valid and one less so.

A post-test was conducted in class to ascertain to what extent students had acquired the target structure of Unit 5. 20 students were tested. The test consisted of three parts. The instructions for Part 1. (6 items) read:

Table 8 - Test prompts:

> TEST prompt A - Write a question. Use the present continuous and words in parentheses.
>
> (you / cook spaghetti / ? )
>
> Answer: Are you cooking spaghetti?

Responses varied:

"Do you cook spaghetti?" (10 responses)

"Can you cook spaghetti?" (9 responses)

Table 9 - test prompts:

In part 2, students saw the following.

> TEST prompt B - Complete the sentence. Use the present continuous form of the verb in parentheses.
>
> a. Bob ... (play) tennis.
>
> Answer: Bob is playing tennis.

Answers varied:

"Bob plays tennis." (14 responses)

"Bob is playing tennis." (3 responses)

Results: Almost no one used the present continuous tense following the written instructions.

In part 3. students were instructed as follows:

TEST prompt C - Write a paragraph about the people in the picture.
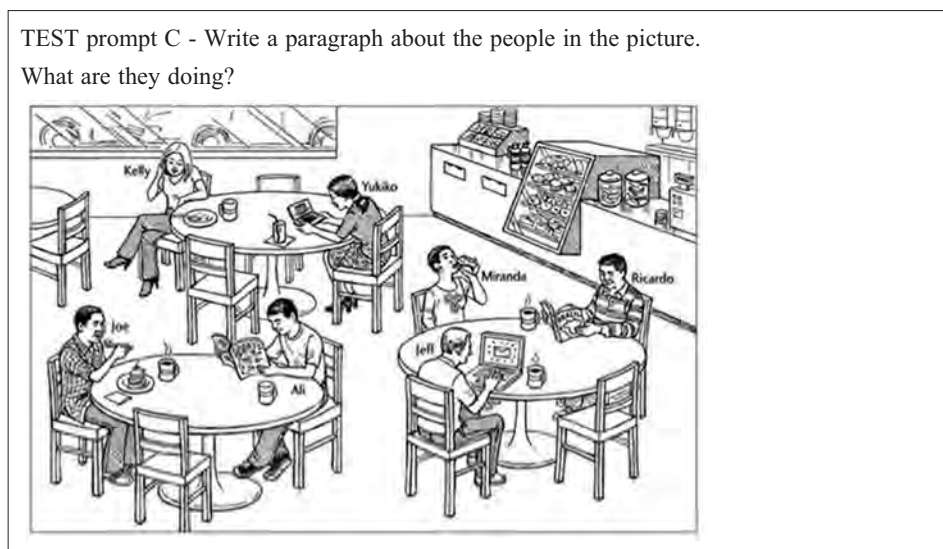What are they doing?



Figure 5 — A visual test prompt.

Fourteen of the twenty students produced consistent present progressive statements, the responses indicating conforming to each aspect of a speech act. The instructions in a task must be designed so as to make the task clear to the learners. Context helps students to form utterances at the level of informed choice.

Given recognizable contextual clues, students demonstrated proficiency on the target structure. However, written instructions on the post-test confused the responses just as it did on the CDROM.

As Chapelle (1999) states, tasks can have two purposes: pedagogical and communicative. The

discussion that ensued made students aware of the need to pay attention to instructions and look for help when the context is ambiguous. Importantly, students felt relieved that they were not at fault in their responses. Students could see clearly the importance context plays in using language authentically.

## 4. CALL as practice

Pennycook (2010) defines linguistic practice as the way people appropriate language for its own use in unique linguistic contexts. The language learning process must be permeated with genuine opportunities for the use of speech acts but in an atmosphere where they are unperturbed about the possibility of linguistic failure. Learners in this study experienced a real sense of achievement while studying language independently in a low-anxiety, linguistically-rich environment. The software for the most part succeeded in having learners process language deeply. Making meaning was a feature of the CALL interaction. Learners were also made critically aware of communication breakdown and the need for repair because of the vague instructions they had to deal with on occasions. This created an opportunity for thinking about the learning process but also the need for collaboration. Perhaps the crucial factor that allowed authentic expression among learners was that they did not feel that they were being evaluated negatively either through CALL or on the post-test. The focus of the post-test was openly talked about and the software was identified as problematic. This shifted the focus of learning away from their agency and onto the a deficit of input (ie, lack of contextual support). This shift was critical, I believe, and it impacted positively on their willingness to communicate in class. I can therefore conclude that the CALL program enhanced learner autonomy and affected motivation positively.

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