3 Ten Suggestions for Teachers with Limited CALL Experience

- **What computer programs are there for ESL?**
- **Don't students waste a lot of time figuring out how to use programs?**
- **What do I do with students who finish activities at different times?**

The suggestions offered in this chapter were fashioned in the spirit of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style,* the classic style manual that defines conciseness. I suggest pedagogical guidelines for implementing classroom activities, with applications for each suggestion found in Part 2. These guidelines don't discount competing views of experienced or inventive teachers but simply frame an integrative approach to CALL. Following these or any other "rules" matters less than their role in encouraging critical thinking about CALL pedagogy as a reinterpretation of conventional language classroom techniques.

☑ TIP 1

Focus on activities, not software titles.

Effective lab classes generally revolve around a well thought-out activity that involves content accessed via computers with stimulating student interaction in the target language.

Class Example

Many language classes have a skill focus. Think first about what *kind of activity* you want your students engaged in that provides exercise for that skill development, and then find a lab activity that supports that objective. Don't do it the other way around. If you're teaching a listening/speaking elective, for example, determine at least four things first:

- the kind of material students will use (authentic or pedantic—usually determined by level)
- how they should engage it (answering cloze or comprehension questions, writing a response essay, or making a verbal response)
- if they will work alone or collaborate in pairs or small groups
- how long they have to complete it

Language teachers routinely set up these types of activities. The new factor in the CALL equation is primarily the *means of delivery*. Answer each of these questions in the lesson planning stage (with ideas from Chapter 6, Audio/Video Activities) and discuss their implementation with lab personnel or experienced CALL teachers a day or more before class.

Pitfalls for New CALL Teachers

With a growing choice of language instruction programs (tutor applications, mostly) offering more and more dazzling capabilities, some teachers new to CALL might pass along their own enthusiasm about such programs to their students or concede to student expectations of multimedia. Telling students to use such a program and work for a set period of time is not a lab class—it's a study hall, which may have a place in students' language learning, but not in a class where human instruction is expected. (See Computers as *Tutor* vs. *Tool* in Chapter 2.) If this were how labs worked, then they wouldn't require language teachers as much as technically proficient lab monitors. The problem isn't in *using* tutor applications, but *when* they're used. If students use these programs in class, then they're doing so *in lieu of* interacting with and getting instruction from the teacher they're paying for, amounting to poor instruction value. Students can use these programs in a self-study lab or buy them on the Internet and use them at home, but they can't get a live teacher and other students to interact with at home.

Grammar practice, pronunciation, vocabulary, and test-preparation applications, content programs, and other pedantic material (such as packages billed as "language systems" or "integrated-skills programs") demonstrate title-based, not activity-based, approaches. Most of these programs don't allow for adaptation, and an overreliance on them may even contribute to a teacher's lack of confidence to construct or carry out activities where the computer is used in class as a tool—a fossilization, if you will, of CALL development—allowing the assortment of programs available in the lab to define what students do in lab class, rather than first determining a language objective for students and then exploring ways to use computers to achieve this objective in an interesting, stimulating way.

Furthermore, rigid adherence to completion of the objective-type exercises (multiple choice, cloze, etc.) in these programs as a measure of lab activity discounts their usefulness in providing practice and reinforcing forms and gives a sense of progress in the most simplistic quantifiable terms. Such activities (sometimes derided as "drill and kill"—repetitive drills informed by a behaviorist model of language instruction) by themselves may well fail to inspire learning, instead reducing language study to a monotonous task completed for its own sake. If activities aren't interesting and challenging to teachers, they aren't likely to be to students either. See Tip 9 for the proper role of tutor applications.

☑ TIP 2

Wade in slowly.

Teachers new to CALL are often put off by the perception that they must be technical gurus, that they must know how to do everything in order to do anything. They don't.

🕮 *Class Example*

Most teachers are familiar with word processing, e-mail, or web browsing. Start with one of these. Text-based activities—reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing—generally offer lower technical demands than those involving multimedia projects or online interactive activities. Many language lab classes make use of a word processor. Fortunately, even people with minimal exposure to computers have likely used one, and they are all fundamentally the same. Microsoft® Word, AppleWorks®, Nisus® Writer, Corel® WordPerfect®, and so on, share the same basic functionality. Some commands may appear in different menus, but they all function the same once they're found, much like driver controls in cars—windshield wipers, cruise control, trunk release—appear in varying locations but work the same in any car.

Writing classes in the lab, furthermore, readily expand into other skills. Incorporate speaking and listening, for example, by having students interview each other and write short biographical pieces. These documents can later include pictures and other information to illustrate the class experience, eventually becoming part of a class book that students

take home—even involving a desktop publishing component as well. Such activities—teamwork, interviewing—also facilitate the social nature of language study. Start simple; build in complexity in manageable steps as necessary. (See Chapter 4 for specific ideas on writing projects, or Chapter 7, Project Activities: Class Books on page 139.)

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

Wade in slowly with simple activities that can be expanded—explore these thoroughly before moving on to something else. Look to colleagues for ideas of what works in the lab, especially activities involving procedures not overly technical or involved. Don't rely on lab personnel to simply create a smorgasbord of application choices available for your class; many will be beyond your skills at first or inappropriate for other reasons (such as tutor applications).

☑ TIP 3

Teach.

Lab class should provide human instruction time and contact with each student.

Class Example

Lab teachers should be quite busy. They should

- circulate
- talk to each student
- look at what students are doing on-screen
- have a student first help another student asking a question
- make sure students are using the target language
- keep abreast of what's happening and who might need help
- let students know that they're not on their own

Teachers should ask questions because questions are the basis of a communicative activity exercising students' speaking, listening, and vocabulary skills. The nature of most lab work is ideally suited for teachers to interact one-on-one with each student or group, providing more individual attention than in the lecture-discussion class.

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

Lab class isn't a time for computers to babysit students or for the teacher to sit at a computer working on other class preparation, writing e-mail, or doing some other business unrelated to actively managing the current class activity.

☑ TIP 4

Appreciate the richness of the computing environment.

The means to the lesson *is* a lesson. If the computers students use in class have a *localized* version of the ***OS***[1] and applications—where the ***menus, toolbars, dialog boxes,*** and so forth, are in the target language—then the interface itself provides stimulus for practical language development and the computer becomes an immersion environment where a student works entirely in the target language. The student must understand the language used in this environment in order to function, and that understanding is reinforced by repeating actions. The complexity of this environment frequently leads students to seek help, either from the teacher or, preferably, from a classmate—thus the importance of pairing students or at least seating them according to unlike L1s. Pairs, if seated adjacent, might work better than groups because students can communicate without leaving their computers. Ideally, in addition to not sharing an L1, pairs should have complementary computing skills—the know-it-all with the neophyte.

🕮 *Class Examples*

1. Use versions of the OS and applications that are localized to the target language. So if you teach French in Turkey, use the French version of the OS and applications, such as the word processor and web browser. The target language should surround the students, their eyes and ears. In an ESL course on web development, for example, students are likely exposed to more new vocabulary in the course of discussions and activities than they might be in a course with "vocabulary" in its title. Although some of the terms have primarily technical applications, most are common English words and expressions used in contexts with many other analogous uses. Talk about the derivation of terms and their less technical uses. For example, when a web browser renders a background by *tiling* the background image, compare it to tiling a floor, repeating a small unit in a predictable pattern to cover a large area. Similarly, before we can cut or copy a word or sentence, we select it, or *highlight* it with the cursor—that is, make it stand out as the highlight of a vacation stands out in our memory.
2. Use the target language to teach the relevant computing skills required by your lab activities and beyond as language through content. For example, use the target language to discuss how to use the computer, access resources, and carry out basic functions (such as printing, saving, accessing network servers, formatting papers and business letters, working with multiple documents or applications, navigating the desktop environment, recovering from problems, etc.). These computing skills

[1] Operating system, such as Mac OS X, Windows XP, and so forth.

will serve students after your class in their continuing education, work, or professional development—a strong motivating factor beyond language learning. In the old ***analog*** lab, your students left with the practical ability to use a Walkman®. They leave the CALL lab computer literate.

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

In foreign language teaching environments where all students speak the same L1, pairing or grouping risks having students speak their L1. A teacher circulating constantly through the class can keep a check on language use. Otherwise, like-L1 environments may see fewer activities where students collaborate with each other and more where they interact with the target language material individually.

☑ TIP 5

Prepare and be patient.

Know everything you ask your students to do. Be familiar with applications you have students use so that you can answer questions knowledgeably. Work through every activity in advance, and anticipate what problems students might encounter. This familiarity is as much the teacher's responsibility as knowing other materials used, such as textbooks.

Class Examples

Have a backup plan, especially for online activities. You must expect that your online resources (websites) will be periodically unavailable or that your entire Internet or network connection may go down. Have an activity planned in reserve that uses ***local*** resources (i.e., on the computer's hard drive or a CD or DVD) or no computers at all. Otherwise, your class is vulnerable to a host of technical calamities lying in wait.

Teach students—the younger of whom may have an unjustified faith in computers (in contrast, perhaps, to the teacher)—to head off loss of work by saving early and often. Teach them to be compulsive savers with the keyboard shortcut of **Ctrl-S** (PC) or **Apple-S** (Mac). With a good saving routine, a computer or network crash will not result in a chilling loss of original work.

Pitfalls for New CALL Teachers

Computers are often unnecessarily complicated and intolerably unstable. That's a fact. Complaining only exacerbates it. When technical problems arise, focus on a "work-around" and salvage the class. Wonder *why* it happened later, not on students' time. Don't criticize the computers or facilities in class or blame technical personnel in the lab (even if warranted). It's bad for the program's image. Students sense a teacher's frustration with technology and may lose faith in the teacher's technical competence, his or her

decision to hold the class in the lab in the first place, and the program's resources generally. Labs represent an investment in the quality and effectiveness of your program. So while you probably can't eliminate problems, you can take steps to anticipate them and prepare contingency plans.

☑ TIP 6

Don't let technology drive your class.

Don't use technology for technology's sake, because it's there, or let it become an end in itself instead of a means. Recognize the difference between taking advantage of a stimulating language learning environment and letting it dictate what you do. To reiterate a theme from Tip 1, think of an interactive language activity first, then look to technology to enable it, if possible.

🕮 *Class Examples*

One of the first abilities many teachers expect of a CALL lab is a holdover from the analog lab: the student intercom function. They want students, even those sitting next to each other, to be able to communicate verbally through headphones attached to the computers. Forget the technical issues involved for a moment (but know they exist). How would this ability enable a richer language experience than having these students talk face-to-face? "We did it in the old lab," doesn't answer the question.[2]

Some language teachers of web page authoring classes argue that we should teach students in these classes ***HTML*** (the code of web pages) because this knowledge *may* help them somewhere down the line. Perhaps. But is it an appropriate choice for a *language* class? Students may pick up a little vocabulary here and there but that answers the wrong question for a teacher to ask. *Any* language method will teach *some* language, but the key is to find the methods that *most effectively* teach language.

Although not providing an adequate substitute for an absent teacher, technology can, nevertheless, salvage a class otherwise cancelled. If you set up a web-based communication forum for your class, such as with ***courseware*** (e.g., WebCT or CourseInfo), a custom website, or an education ***portal*** (such as **Nicenet**), then you can have students work on a predefined activity in the lab in your absence. Ideally, the absent teacher would be able to communicate with students during class, to take roll and provide assistance, by a

[2] Nonetheless, some teachers have justified the use of computer-facilitated audio chatting among students in the same lab class, particularly in foreign language environments with young learners. Duncan Charters, at Principia College in Illinois, supports this use of the technology for many reasons, such as that it provides a fun change of pace to other activities, eliminates non-verbal communication (giving practice for phone conversations that many learners find difficult), reduces student intimidation by allowing them to speak without being watched, tends to keep them focused on the task rather than horsing around with a friend next to them, and allows for greater and more efficient variety in pairing students.

synchronous chat, bulletin board, or simple e-mail group (see Chapter 5, Internet Activities). For example, I observed students working in an ESL lab class in Boston when their teacher was attending a conference in Amsterdam. The students were instructed to go to the teacher's website at the start of each lab class to read the assignment for the day.

On the day of his absence, they were instructed, on the assignment page, to log in to a private text chat room set up for the class, where the teacher greeted them from a **cybercafe** (where it was 9:00 PM). He led them through a discussion of art on display at the Rijksmuseum. While they viewed the images in a separate browser ***window,*** he directed questions at individual students. The entire text of the chat was logged by the program and later printed by the teacher for discussion. In addition to observing this experiment in distance learning, I assisted students with technical questions, assistance that could otherwise be provided by a lab assistant or a technically proficient student in class—the latter an example of cooperative learning.

Nicenet

Nicenet's Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) is a free web resource for education. Teachers can create class groups and manage class communications similar to those offered by subscription-based courseware services (WebCT, CourseInfo, etc.). Nicenet offers a bulletin board for students in a class, where they can post messages on a topic, personal messaging, document sharing, scheduling, and link sharing *(www.nicenet.org)*.

Cybercafe

A coffee shop where patrons can also rent time on a computer, usually for web browsing or e-mail. Cybercafes, or Internet cafes, didn't catch on in the United Sates to the extent that they have abroad, especially in countries with high telephone rates. They cater especially to tourists and business travelers.

I later used the same distance teaching technique for my class in Boston through a chat interface while at a conference in Turkey. The students had been creating their own web pages. We critiqued each student's work in one browser window while referring to another, which displayed a student's pages. Attendance at both of these distance teaching classes was consistent with the semester average, and participation among otherwise shy students was impressive. Thus we used technology to achieve a teaching objective, not simply because that capability existed.

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

While technology enhances many activities, in terms of access, interaction, and teaching language through content, it's not a panacea for all language learning challenges and may fail to provide the most effective environment in certain cases or when the teacher does not carefully choose and plan activities.

☑ TIP 7

Invest time in training and orientation.

Teach students how to use tools of the lab classroom, their computers. Taking the time to walk students through the use of a new application or activity as a class will save time because it's easier to say something *once* to the class before an activity than to individually instruct *each* student during an activity. Time invested initially on orientation will pay off with less confusion later that must be addressed one student at a time. Use a show-and-tell method with a projector, if possible. Don't assume that students know computers or each program because they're young. They don't. As discussed in Tip 4, this instruction is a listening comprehension and vocabulary activity in itself.

Class Example

A lab administrator could head off problems relating to insufficeint lab orientation by scheduling *all* classes for orientations by lab staff at the beginning of the semester. Large programs might benefit from creating an orientation video or presentation slide show for students, one made available on the computers on a self-access basis. Such a video or presentation could be produced in the lab with digital video footage, still shots, screen shots, titles, and voice-over narration. Students could watch the program individually replaying segments as needed, and complete a worksheet of salient points. A lab assistant could discuss the answers with the group and respond to any other questions as well.

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

Students with extensive computing experience may bring a false sense of confidence into the lab, skip orientation sessions, or pay little attention to instructions and directions in the lab. These students may fail to appreciate that their knowledge of computers bears little relevance to the specific procedures and learning resources of a particular lab. Such attitudes should not be given a pass by the teacher. Labs also have a right to expect students to know and respect the rules of using the facilities so that they can be maintained for all students.

☑ TIP 8

Pace activities.

There are two issues relating to pace:

1. *Students finish at different times.* Allowing students to complete activities at their own pace is part of the beauty of CALL. The challenge comes not with students taking too long to complete tasks but with those finishing before the others. What to do with them? Have *buffer* activities ready for these students—anything

providing some language learning stimulation of short or variable duration and requiring little or no direction. (See Chapter 5, Internet Activities: Pedantic Language Practice on page 77 for buffer activity ideas.)

2. *Transitioning from one activity to another takes time.* Choose your activities carefully for how much lab class time they will occupy, noting that many lab activities span several classes. Students are slow to change gears when they're at the wheel (that is, the mouse), so segue from one activity to another without abruptly interrupting their momentum. New activities must overcome the inertia of the preceding one while addressing the technical overhead of the new one. Allot more time to activities in the lab than you would in a conventional class, and be careful of rushing into another activity without sufficient class time to finish it. This approach differs from the less interactive conventional audio lab where we needed to mix things up to keep students awake.

Class Example

The more complicated the activity, the greater the spread of finishing times among students will be. While buffer activities are the easiest to implement and provide flexibility, there are other options to try, depending on the students, their level, and the environment:

- Ask those finishing earlier to help a neighbor, though this may only work with students exhibiting leadership or helpfulness; otherwise, it's not much of an incentive for more proficient students.
- Ask early finishers to help with material preparation or to follow up on some tricky question not fully answered in a class discussion—an assignment especially attractive to students if the answer is to be found on the Internet.
- Have multiple projects in progress at any one time to provide work for these students to alternate between.
- Have students keep track of their lab work with an activity log, one that gives them direction for the next or buffer activities.

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

While finishing times for activities may differ among students, the *relative challenge* may still be the same for students of varying proficiencies; that is, one student may take longer than others to complete a listening comprehension cloze activity because the level of the exercise could have presented more of a challenge for him or her. The student didn't necessarily do less work. A student who finishes earlier and then moves on to complete another of the same type of activity, likewise, can't simply be seen as doing twice the work because it was, perhaps, easier for him or her.

☑ TIP 9

Be a resource guide.

A lab teacher's skill is largely exhibited in his or her ability to choose appropriate and effective materials and activities and to teach access skills and epistemology, particularly of the enormous Internet resources. As a lab teacher, you are the librarian of the lab in that it is partly your responsibility to introduce students to appropriate lab resources, whether used in class or not, in fact, especially for relevant materials you won't have time to use in class. Your role in the use of a content program, such as a grammar or pronunciation program, for example, is to *diagnose* individual student needs and *assign* the appropriate area to focus on for each. They can then work through activities on their own in a self-access lab. (See the discussion on the use of content activities in Chapter 9.)

Many software programs suffer from some degree of poor instructional design or lack intuitive navigation and function. You must bridge the gap between the value a program has to offer and a student's ability to tap into it by understanding the procedures for using it and being aware of the resources and features available.

Class Example

A teacher of a test-preparation class (such as for the TOEFL®) might be inclined to have students use one of many available computer-based test (CBT) preparation programs in lab class. While this use of lab time for tutor programs defies Tip 1, there is value in *introducing* students to the resource and encouraging them to work with it *on their own time*. Preview these programs to learn exactly how they work including, for test-prep software, if a test can be paused and resumed later, if results include explanations of correct and incorrect responses, and if these annotated results can be printed. Demonstrate for students, ideally with the use of a projector, how to use and navigate the program, its strengths and weaknesses, including glitches that might waste student time.

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

While familiarizing students with content or pedantic programs as resources available for their use outside of class, don't forget to move on to introducing other programs or doing other activities. That is, keep Tip 1 in mind and don't let students roll from learning how to use one of these tutor programs into spending the whole class using it, though it may be difficult to curb their momentum.

☑ TIP 10

Orchestrate communicative activities.

Some second language teachers see language teaching as at least as much of a performance art as an academic discipline. This notion—sure to stir opposition—holds that a CALL teacher's job is to orchestrate communicative activities that are student centered and student empowering. In a CALL lab, students have an expectation of hands-on work and active participation more than passive listening; they are more predisposed to *doing* something. Give them instructions for an activity, and let them have at it. Develop open-ended activities where students create as much as possible and are not arbitrarily restricted to a narrow, predefined model. And pairing proves critical here, because if they are at least speaking the target language (in unlike L1 pairs, if possible), then they are getting valuable speaking and listening practice in the process regardless of their progress on the activity itself.

Class Example

Using the Socratic method in class, you can demonstrate how useful students can be to each other and how they should look to each other first to answer their computer or activity questions. Why answer a student's question when you can get another student to do it for you? It takes more finesse to facilitate understanding through productive query and interaction than it does to simply be a font of knowledge. But teachers know that already.

Pitfall for New CALL Teachers

Getting students' attention in a lab class can be difficult. You're competing with the computer in front of each one of them. Make announcements and give instruction at the beginning, and keep it short. If your lab has the ability to lock students' screens temporarily, use it (but judiciously—students may be gritting their teeth till they can get back to the computer).

Keep these ten suggestions in mind while you consider implementing any of the class activities from Part 2.

Assessing Lab Effectiveness

How do you know that your labs are working? Is there a special test to indicate progress? How do you know your regular classroom teaching is effective? Assessment is the same: improved ability and inclination to communicate in the target language, higher test scores, good attendance, etc. Keep in mind that in most situations the lab component (not including individual access) makes up a small percentage of a student's language instruction time overall. Also, look at your attendance in lab classes versus other classes, read what students write about the lab in their evaluations, and try to pick up what they're saying to each other about the lab.