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TELL us about CALL: An introduction to the Virtual Special Issue (VSI) on the development of technology enhanced and computer assisted language learning published in the System Journal

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ABSTRACT

Virtual Special Issues (VSIs) are a new format introduced to *System* to highlight previously published articles that made a particular impact on the field. This introduction to the first VSI, "TELL us about CALL", shows developments of Technology enhanced (TELL) or Computer Assisted (CALL) language learning represented through often-cited articles. As one of the most prominent and long-standing journals dealing with technology in language learning and teaching, *System* is well placed to represent the development of the field. For this purpose, twelve articles from issues of *System* between 2004 and 2015 were chosen based on the frequency of citations they received, weighted by number of years in publication.

The selection shows that CALL and TELL have come a long way over the past decade: trends towards more ecological and long-term studies are identified, and speculation about future developments is presented. A broader view of the field also ascertains that CALL has become normalised, in practice as well as in research, and the implicit use of computers for language teaching as well as for data collection and data analysis has led to a widening of publication outlets and an uptake of TELL articles in applied linguistics publications, in general.

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1. Introduction

The journal, System, has from its beginning had a special interest in the technology enhanced learning and teaching of languages: it is no co-incidence that the subheading of the journal is: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics. This Virtual Special Issue, the first of its kind for our journal, aims to bring together the most influential articles in this field from our journal and to emphasise the relevance but also the development of TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning) and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) over the past ten years approximately.

Looking at a current issue of System, it is clearly noticeable that TELL and CALL are no longer the main topics presented in our journal. There are a number of different reasons for this. For one, CALL has become "normalised" as Stephen Bax predicted

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in 2003. Another reason is that CALL and TELL articles are published increasingly in mainstream journals as well. When Zhao (2003) analysed CALL publications between the years 1997 and 2001, he found that two thirds of all CALL articles were published in one of three journals: CALICO, the Language Learning and Technology (LLT) journal, and System. 68% of CALL articles were published by journals specialising in language teaching and technology, i.e., journals specifically devoted to CALL or TELL.

Repeating his literature search in 2015, one of the editors of this VSI (Stickler, in press) has identified changing trends in the years from 2006 to the beginning of 2015: amongst the big players in CALL specialist journals, new "kids" have appeared on the block: the Computer Assisted Language Learning journal and ReCALL, the journal of the European association for CALL research (EuroCALL). These two journals together now host 32% of CALL publications. 24% of CALL related articles have now moved to mainstream applied linguistics journals, predominately the Modern Language Journal with 30 articles and Foreign Language Annals with 23. 17% of publications in our field can now be found in computing-related journals, as compared to 14% in the 2003 study. Computers & Education, for example, published 39 articles on second language learning in the years investigated. Although this seems a high number for the CALL field, it is still a negligible percentage for this high volume, prestigious journal, which leaves language learning relatively marginal in the field of educational technology as a whole.

The move of publication outlets to mainstream journals demonstrates the "normalisation" of this field. In turn, it has opened up journals with an interest in CALL or TELL topics to other, less specialised areas. This trend can be observed when looking at the themes of the past two special issues of System: pragmatics and language learning strategies. Comparing two randomly chosen issues of System from its early days, from the heydays of specialised CALL research (as identified by Zhao), and from the last year, show the difference in themes addressed: Whereas in 2003, System published seven articles in the March issue (31/1), four of which were roughly technology-related, in 2014 the December issue consists of 13 articles, with a ratio of 15% (i.e., only two papers) for TELL or CALL. It is evident that fewer contributions have an explicit technology theme. However, a number of studies use technology as a contributing means or method, either for data collection (e.g., the use of corpora), data analysis, or as part of the set-up (e.g., as part of a classroom activity). "Normalisation" has taken place, not just in the language classroom but also in researching language teaching and learning.

This VSI has selected articles from volumes of System published over the past approximately ten years (2004—2015). Amongst those issues, only articles explicitly dealing with TELL or CALL, where the main purpose of the study includes some necessity for technology, either in the teaching or in the data analysis of the reported project, were selected. The topics include concordancing, the use of wikis in language teaching and mobile technologies, to name just a few of the wide range covered. Our aim in compiling the VSI was to highlight exemplary papers in CALL published in System but also showing their influence in the field as a whole. We selected papers cited frequently by scholars in our area, with the citation numbers not taken at face-value but weighted by year. So, an article from 2014 that has already garnered 10 citations would count as more influential than an article that has collected 10 citations over the 10 years since its first publication in 2004, for example. Of course, this does not guarantee that we have selected the most widely cited articles, as topic sometimes are "fashionable" in our highly volatile and fast-moving research area, and might attract less attention in a few years' time.

Apart from two exceptions detailed below, articles are presented chronologically, allowing us to point out trends in the field related to general developments. As far back as 1998, Warschauer and Healey described the historic development of CALL research, linking shifting emphases to pedagogical theories. Starting with behaviourism, they describe drill activities in CALL as the first phase, followed by communicative CALL where more room was given to learners' creativity and authentic communication. The last phase described in this state-of-the-art article of the late 1990s was focused on the World Wide Web and its potential for real communication with the outside world, giving students potentially relevant and meaningful tasks. At that time, there was little CALL research to report on beyond the experimental and mostly positivist studies of the first two phases. Currently, we are experiencing a trend towards more ecological approaches to CALL research, rather than the experimental studies dominating its early years; researchers are looking at CALL as a "normalised" teaching and learning practice, and try to investigate what is really happening when languages are learned with the help of technology using new or newly adapted methods. Locating these trends in our own journal allows us to pinpoint specific articles as influential publications that take the field forward. This analysis will also allow us to speculate about the future of CALL or where we are likely to go from here.

2. Summary of 12 most cited articles in System (2004—2015)

As mentioned above, the articles in the VSI and their short descriptions below are arranged chronologically apart from two articles: Chambers and Bax (2006) and Cui and Bull (2005) form the frame for this VSI. The article by Chamber and Bax, to a certain degree, provides theoretical standards to evaluate these most cited articles in System published in the last years. To finish the VSI, we have chosen Cui and Bull's article (2005). It is frequently cited despite being an unusual format for the journal as it focused on the application of a technology in foreign language teaching that was — for the time of publication — state-of-the-art. With smartphones since then becoming a necessity for individuals, the interest in using mobile technology in language teaching and learning also increased drastically, leading to a high number of citations for this early study of mobile learning. These two articles reflect two intertwined forces driving our field forward — forward theoretical thinking and ever-advancing technology.