The internet generation's clear Call for knowledge

Huw Jarvis on the evolution of computer assisted language learning

M y interest in computer assisted language learning (CALL) began in the early 1980s when I taught in Kuwait. By the end of the week students and teachers were ready to wind down. The institute was equipped with four computers and for many of us CALL became the ideal ‘wartime Thursday afternoon’ option.

Students would work on programmes to practice some of the language that had been covered during the week. For example, this might involve playing a computer version of hangman whereby students tried to guess a word by inputting possible letters one by one, the object of the game being to guess the correct word before being linguistically annihilated.

CALL had an explicit tutorial role and it followed the behaviourist approach to teaching and learning, with students rewarded for correct input. As the 1980s progressed the communicative approach became well established in ELT and in CALL we saw a shift to simulation packages such as London Adventure, which involved students working in small groups to plan a trip around London. Text reconstruction packages in which students built up a full text on the screen by typing in missing words were also popular.

As with most new education paradigms, in CALL there was a range of developments associated with the new technology. Machine-gun-equipped robot border guards patrolled the demilitarized zone, the tense border with North Korea. At 14.4 billion won (£8.12 million) each, robot border guards can identify whether a soldier is a North Korean infiltrator and whether they’re surrendering. Sometimes less terrifying, but no less useful, the teaching robot is now infiltrating the classroom’s boundary.

As most new education technology, finding appropriate ways to use the technology is more important than the hardware itself. (Many EFL teachers will recall being told, ‘You have to use the interactive white-board in your lesson because the inspector’s coming.’) Current EFL robot trials suggest Korea’s students and teachers should want to try ‘virtual’ EFL classrooms to support native teachers. One aim is to provide remote support to teachers in provincial cities, drawing on the wider base of teaching skills in Seoul.

The latest Korean robo-teacher is Ruti (penguin-shaped), a Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (Kaisi)-developed ‘telepresence’ robot deployed in schools in the cities of Nonsan and Daejeon. A video of Ruti at work, shown by the Korea Gazette shows what is basically a TV monitor on the end of a pole, complete with a penguin-shaped robotic body. The screen is the face of the native speaker EFL teacher, who converses with the class while the robot walks around interacting with the students, a Korean teacher and the classroom whiteboard. As well as Ruti, there’s the smaller ENGKEY robot, another Kaisi product. Some 36 of these were deployed in Korean schools last year.

There’s also a stand-alone version of ENGKEY with no human controller, which instead uses voice recognition to help students practice English pronunciation, particularly useful for that boring reinforcement work that language learning rehab comes with. ENGKEY is a fembot (though the female voice has proven more effective in teaching English to girls in one lesson demonstrated to Korea Times), Engkey told a student, ‘Not good this time! You need to focus more on your accent. Let’s try again.’

Many robotics enthusiasts believe the effectiveness of native speaker teachers – in short supply collaborating with remote classrooms in Korea may be reduced. The nightmare of a classroom-style rise in the machineries in EFL is still a long way off, but teachers should perhaps be alarmed by claims for the next phase.

The Hyundai Research Institute’s Shin Joongwon predicted last year in the New York Times that robo-teachers will eventually evolve into standalone teachers which do not need human support, permitting the estimated 30,000 native-speaker teachers in Korea out of a job. Kaisi’s Engkey team leader added that Engkey will ‘mature’ enough to completely replace English teachers in three to five years.