The Call Triangle: Student, Teacher & Institution: A Report from EUROCALL 2011

IRINA AVERIANOVA

"The Call Triangle: Student, Teacher and Institution" was the topic of the 2011 Annual International Conference of EUROCALL, which assembled at the end of summer in the beautiful, historic town of Nottingham, in the United Kingdom. The choice of the venue was not accidental, as the University of Nottingham, which hosted the conference this year, for a number of years has been at the forefront of promoting the application of language learning technologies, not only on its three local campuses but also at its two overseas branches in China and Malaysia. No less important for a truly global conference (in spite of the *Euro* tag in its name) was the fact that the hosting institution, according to *Good University Guide 2011* published by a mainstream British newspaper *The Sunday Times*, is "the embodiment of the modern international university ⋯ with about a quarter of its students coming from abroad."

The European Association for Computer-Assisted Language Learning (EUROCALL) was established and launched in 1993 with the support of the European Commission to promote innovative research, development and practice in the area of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL). That same year, EUROCALL gathered CALL practitioners, developers, and researchers from over 30 countries at its first international conference, which was hosted by the University of Hull in the UK. Since its creation, EUROCALL has been highly committed to facilitating knowledge transfer through special interest meetings, staff mobility arrangements, and disseminating theoretical and practical findings through its two publications, the *EUROCALL Review* and the biannual journal *ReCALL*, published by Cambridge University Press. Over 250 academic articles have seen the light in the existing 19 volumes. The specific interests of EUROCALL are reflected in its current five Special Interest Groups, or SIGs: Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), Corpus CALL, Natural Language Processing, Virtual Worlds and Teacher Education.

Of no less importance are EUROCALL annual conferences, aimed at bringing together educators, researchers, administrators, designers of software and language learning systems, equipment and software suppliers and other professionals involved in CALL and TELL from Europe and all over the world. They are assembled annually in a European country, and EUROCALL 2011 was the nineteenth convention of this organization. Ranking high among other prestigious CALL conferences, EUROCALL conferences naturally place significant emphasis on the European Union language learning priorities and EU-funded projects. In fact, delegates to the conference must be current members of EUROCALL or one of its affiliates (CALICO, IALLT or JALT). From the earliest days of the Lingua Programme, started by the EU 21 years ago, the European Commission has always relied on ICT in its campaign to increase the quality and the quantity of language learning in Europe. It is partnered with EUROCALL for the dissemination and implementation of its programs. In a similar way, GloCALL conferences aim at the Asian educational arena and, by choosing venues in Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, and other Asian countries, strive to provide the opportunities for practitioners and researchers in the area to catch a glimpse of the recent developments in the field of CALL. Like the GloCALL meetings, the EUROCALL conferences are in no

way geographically limited, as now EUROCALL comprises individuals and institutions from 35 different countries from the five continents.

Typically, a EUROCALL conference tries to embrace a variety of topics and interests emerging in the dynamically changing and developing field of technology in education. Gradually, the topics of EURO-CALL conferences have developed from looking into new emerging technologies and their applications in education to the issues of integration, emancipation, effectiveness and learning outcomes that technology can offer to language learning. EUROCALL 2011 was no exception in the breadth of topics, as it listed eighteen various areas of research and practice in the field. Among those were the customary strands for all EUROCALL conferences, including "Recent developments in mobile learning," "Language learning in virtual environments," "The use of new technologies at schools" and so on. At the same time, the emphasis of the 2011 conference was on the key players in language learning: students, teachers and schools. The theme of the EUROCALL Conference in Nottingham was "The Call Triangle: Student, Teacher and Institution." The theme explored and reflected on the relationship between the main "actors" in the educational triangle, which were further separated into strands such as "Challenges of e-learning: the role of the institution," "E-learning: student expectations and experience," "Success of e-learning through the eyes of the student," "Promoting the use of new technologies amongst language teaching professionals," and others.

Evidently, the conference theme struck a chord with many professionals in the area of CALL, as the number of submissions prompted the conference organizers to introduce for the first time the option of shorter, 30−minute paper presentations side-by-side with the traditional 45−minute format for longer papers. Thanks to this arrangement, the conference program managed to accommodate within its four working days 3 keynote speeches, 105 parallel sessions, 7 workshops, 10 educational showcases, 58 poster sessions, a Round Table discussion, as well as various meetings and commercial exhibitions.

The opening ceremony, with its catch phrase "Monolingualism is a curable disease," set the conference off on a cheerful and energetic note. The welcome speeches by Pro-Vice Chancellor Christine Ennew and Head of the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies Prof. Catherine Davies showed not only their strong support for language teaching at the University of Nottingham and the event it hosted, but also very positive and encouraging views on the use of new technologies in education. Their message, as some of the participants later recalled, was very inspiring, especially for those teachers struggling for institutional support in their e-learning endeavors.

A certain reverse-chronological perspective on the CALL triangle was provided by the invited keynote speakers. The first invited presenter, Professor Mike Sharples from Nottingham University, addressed what is still perceived by many as the future of the field, namely mobile technology and incidental learning with smart phones. The second keynote speaker, Gary Motteram, described the present state of language teaching using technology. His point was that currently CALL is influenced by a constellation of factors, including the changing nature of society and the role of language, the impact of globalization, the growing emphasis on the skills that are needed for a learner in the 21st century. These factors outside of education often prevent the technology from achieving the expected paradigm shifts in education. Finally, Gillian McLaughlin, a language teacher and an experienced grant funding manager, took the audience on the European journey of twenty-one years of EU language programs and outlined past achievements and current opportunities for CALL specialists. Thus, the keynote speakers set the stage for a more detailed discussion of the key issues during paper and poster presentations, as well as in numerous informal gatherings over coffee, lunch and evening social events.

It was obviously impossible for even the most zealous participants to attend every presentation, as there were as many as eight parallel sessions running concurrently. Almost equally impossible is to describe in one brief report all those I attended. In actuality, there is hardly any need to do this, because all presentations were video-recorded and are scheduled to be posted on the conference's Virtual Strand site

in the near future. Therefore, I will try to briefly describe only those presentations and projects which impressed me the most.

First, one cannot help but notice that the virtual learning environments (also *synthetic worlds* and *Multi-User Virtual Environments*, or *MUVEs*) continue to attract the growing attention of foreign language teachers and researchers. At this conference, this strand was again an obvious favorite, as there were twenty-two paper and poster presentations and two workshops dedicated to this topic. The last few years have seen a tremendous increase in the number of innovative educational projects based on the use of virtual worlds such as Second Life. In fact, it was noted that language learning in virtual worlds is gradually coming of age. In recent years, several EU-funded projects such as AVALON, NIFLAR and AVATAR have developed and explored numerous language-learning scenarios in Second Life and other virtual worlds. Presenters reported on their experience of using virtual worlds in building cross-cultural interaction, developing pragmatic cross-cultural knowledge, practicing nonverbal behavior in the target language environment, learning a second language through virtual collaborative projects and so on. The positive learning outcomes of the interactive 3D game *Quest*, hailed by some presenters in EUROCALL 2010, continue to attract researchers to this software. Thus, two reports gave favorable assessment of incidental learning occurring in various *Quest* activities. Each new CALL conference sees further diversification of virtual-world application in language teaching and learning. This one, for instance, included reports on using virtual worlds in courses of learning foreign languages for specific purposes (e.g., architecture, academic writing, etc.), in teaching sociolinguistics, and as a tool for raising general awareness of social, cultural or gender issues. There has also been an increase in the range of subjects studied with regard to their use of virtual worlds. Thus, there was a study of media worlds of children and sign language users.

While most of the presenters praised the integration of virtual environments in language teaching, distance and blended learning in particular, some of them pointed out that pedagogic research on the practical experience of students and meaningful learning outcomes of teaching with virtual worlds has only just started. In particular, many questions as to the appropriateness of Second Life across such variables as age, gender, IT expertise and others have not yet been answered. Also, keeping with the focus on the learning triangle agencies, the researchers from Utrecht University reported a number of difficulties they identified while exploring pedagogical, organizational and technical issues involved in the European NIFLAR (Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research) project. For instance, they observed that while institutions are willing to embrace the implementation of cutting-edge technologies in educational process, many teaching practitioners are reluctant to integrate telecollaboration and Second Life in their teaching, as they are all too aware of the significant burden such initiatives may impose. Nevertheless, my general impression derived from the Virtual World Strand sessions that I attended is that the benefits and the added value this technological environment offers for language teaching obviously outnumber difficulties and pitfalls it entails and that it will continue its steady development in CALL. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, none of the projects presented last year at EUROCALL 2010 were revisited this time, so there was no opportunity to follow up on the progress and outcomes of the earlier experiments with virtual worlds.

Another strand that interested me in connection with my own research, "Recent Developments in Mobile Learning," was not, regretfully, as well-represented as "Virtual Worlds." While the keynote address by Sharples showed how smart phones can bridge the gap between direct language instruction and independent learning through self-organized reading and personalized vocabulary, the paper presentations amounted to only a few inspiring reports from CALL practitioners who use mobile phones in their teaching. Of these, the two most interesting papers were by Gutierrez-Colon Plana and Gallardo-Torrano about using SMS messages as a support tool in EFL classes, and by a team from Kyoto University of Foreign Studies which developed vocabulary databases to be used on mobile devices, such as cell phones and tablet

PCs. These two presentations, together with my own on the attitudes towards cell phones in the classroom, were the only ones directly related to cell phones, which remain the most fast-paced and universally spread digital technology available now. By and large, the potential these devices hold for language teaching has not been uncovered yet. To some extent, this may be explained by the continuing mistrust of educational institutions toward the use of mobile phones for teaching and learning purposes. Despite the availability of the device and learners' overwhelming attachment to it, a number of negative instances of cell phone misuse and abuse, such as cheating, disrupting classes, bullying, sexting, and multitasking, keep educators doubtful of — if not openly negative to — implementing this mobile technology in academic settings. This situation possibly accounts for the fact that my report on the results of the survey on attitudes towards the use of cell phones in the classroom gathered quite a satisfying audience (for the end of the day) and generated a heated discussion, which went long beyond the limits of the allotted time.

With this respect I'd like to recount one interesting conversation that took place during one poster presentation. The researcher Rusangawa from Rwanda presented the results of a comparative study of technical vocabulary acquisition with the help of traditional blackboard methods and with multimedia, with the experimental multimedia group showing a remarkable gain over the group from the ordinary, non-tech classroom. He mentioned that in his university there was only one computer laboratory available for undergraduates, while very few students had their own PCs. In response to my question about cell phones, he said that almost everybody has one. In my presentation later, I mentioned this fact as yet another proof of the fact that just the availability of such mobile technology as cell phones warrants the need of the CALL community to reinforce research and development of convincing pedagogic practices to accelerate the integration of mobile phones into formal teaching and learning.

There were two more interesting presentations from other strands that attracted my attention. First, one of the most useful presentations for language teachers, from my point of view, was a showcase by Joe Dale, an independent digital technology consultant, "New tools, new opportunities, and personal learning networks." Though intended for primary and secondary school teachers, it was applicable to any educator interested in the new opportunities, which Web 2.0 offers for breaking down the walls of the classroom and expanding reading and writing practice. One of highlights of this presentation was the adaptation of Benjamin Bloom's digital taxonomy of different Web tools according to different cognitive skills they develop and exercise. The taxonomy is shaped as a pyramid at the bottom of which is "Understanding," supported by such applications as *Google*, *Footnote*, *Webspirator* and others. The upper skill of "Applying" can be enhanced by *Go2WEB2.0*, *Gliffy*, and *Evernote*, while the higher-level skills of "Analyzing" and "Evaluating" can be exercised with the help of such tools as *Create a Graph*, *Scribble MAPS*, *R Campus*, *E Portfolio*, *Rubistar*, *Protagonize*, *YouTube* and others. The topmost skill of "Creating" can be supported by *Wikispaces*, *Glogster EDU*, and *Voicethread*. The presenter pointed out that mastering these tools not only makes writing and publishing pupils' work an easy and highly-motivating experience, but it also helps to create one's personal learning space. There may be some criticism as to the presenter's choosing these particular tools while ignoring other, vastly popular sharing sites, such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Mixi,* and others. Also, while some programs can be very specific and directed toward one particular skill, such as *Create a Graph* or *Scribble MAPS*, the use of other Web tools definitely calls for a complex cognitive approach and cannot be broken into such an accurate differentiation between the skills and tools as the author suggested.

This criticism does not, however, diminish the point the presenter made regarding creating one's personal learning environment equipped with various useful tools that Web offers for different purposes. For a teacher, besides those tools mentioned above, one more part of this environment can be a professional network, through which s/he can get relevant information, as well as guidance and advice. An introduction of one such network, *MFL Twitterati*, was another highlight of Dale's presentation. This online network unites about 500 language professionals in the UK, all of whom are interested in new tools for teaching and

exchange their ideas through Twitter. Together with *Flashmeeting*, a weekly videoconferencing site, and online news release *MFL Times Daily*, these platforms provide an inspiring example of a growing professional network, through which educators can publicize their articles, discuss the use of new technologies and get links to the most recent happenings in teaching, in the UK and abroad.

Another presentation worth mentioning was a poster-session by Bob Gettings, from Hokusei Gakuen University. It reported on the results of a study on women English majors' attitudes towards using English in karaoke and other music-linked exercises in EFL conversation classes. The presenter showed that teachers could exploit Japanese youths' interest in karaoke and English-language pop songs to teach vocabulary and grammar, polish pronunciation and introduce culture-specific information. He suggested some useful resources that teachers can use to build their karaoke-based activities, such as "Tune into English" (http://www.tuneintoenglish.com/) and "Musical English International" (http://www. musicalenglishlessons.org/). Another thing, which appealed to me in this project, is that the researcher put into practice the innovative idea of using karaoke in teaching English that was suggested some years ago by our former colleague, Elizabeth Richards (Richards & Sayenko, 2009). What seemed to many as odd or eccentric at that time has turned out to be a fruitful, enjoyable and highly motivating language learning practice, as Gettings' research discovered. Also, this research proved once again that CALL is really a fast moving, ever adaptable, and truly international approach to education.

The Round Table discussion closed the conference. This year the usual panel format was changed: first, the audience was encouraged to ask questions and panelists responded, rather than the panelists making statements first and then inviting the audience to comment. This resulted in a very lively and stimulating discussion, where the participants steered the conversation towards those issues that interested them most. One of the topics that emerged in the discussion was the correlation between new and old technologies in CALL. As one of the panelists, Graham Davies, emphasized in his blog, it was interesting to observe "the way in which some technologies sit around for many years before the CALL community takes notice of them, or the way in which 'forgotten' technologies make a comeback, when newcomers to CALL 'discover' them and find that they can be implemented very effectively in new technological environments, Intelligent CALL (ICALL) being a typical example" (EUROCALL 2011 Virtual Strand). These and other issues raised at the Round Table vividly showed that digital technologies and applications, available on Web 2.0, present enormous opportunities for enriching the pedagogical methods and contents of language teaching. While, for an individual practitioner, such a rich potential may seem challenging, if not overwhelming, teachers and researchers can greatly benefit from the common wisdom and experience accumulated in the field. For many, the EUROCALL 2011 conference was yet another wonderful opportunity for such mutually beneficial sharing.

Finally, some words should be said about the social offerings of this year's EUROCALL gathering. On the first evening, the participants were warmly welcomed by the Lord Mayor of Nottingham, Councilor Michael Wildgust, at the opening reception and "A Taste of the East Midlands" Cold Finger Buffet. On the second day, we were invited to the University Park, one of the largest and greenest campuses of the UK, where a buffet dinner was served to live jazz in the historic Lenton and Wortley Hall. The climax of the well-organized cultural program was the Gala Dinner at Blotts Country Club in Holme Pierrepont. Of course, a trip to Nottingham would not be complete without an encounter with its most famous citizen, legendary Robin Hood. He and his loyal companions Friar Tuck, Little John, Maid Marian and a juggler greeted us at the Country Club, which was set in the beautiful Nottinghamshire countryside. Robin was a generous host indeed, and there was hardly a participant who didn't get his or her photo taken together with Hood and his companions. The outdoor cocktails served during the photo session and the dinner, itself, were accompanied by the excellent performance of a period-dressed quartet, singing old English songs and playing traditional English instruments. The dinner ended with a great disco, where the selection of all-

Irina Averianova

time favorites left no one indifferent, sulking lonely in the corner.

It is worth emphasizing, once more, that, besides relaxation and socializing, all these gatherings were yet another opportunity to network and discuss professional practice and participants' various research activities. The same was continued over lunches and coffee breaks on the beautifully landscaped Jubilee campus. Its lavish greenery and variety of wild life, which has chosen the university campus as its habitat, made it obvious to all of us why Nottingham, according to its Vice Chancellor Prof. David Greenaway (sic!), was ranked at the top in Europe and second in the world by the UI Green Metric ranking of leading green universities[1].

Overall, the conference was a very useful and rewarding experience. All the credit for the smooth running of such a large scale event goes to the Chair of EUROCALL 2011, Oranna Speicher and her friendly, helpful team, which made every effort to produce a conference of exceptionally high standard. Filled with new ideas, encouragement and challenge, the participants reluctantly parted, until the next EUROCALL conference, to be hosted in August 2012 by the University of Gothenburg in partnership with the Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden.

References

The Call Triangle: Student, Teacher and Institution. EUROCALL 2011, 31st August to 3rd September, Nottingham, England. Conference Program. EUROCALL 2011: Conference Organizing Committee.

EUROCALL 2011 Virtual Strand. Available at: http://virtualeurocall.blogspot.com/

Richards, E. and T. Sayenko. (2009). Karaoke: The way of the future? In M. Thomas (Ed.), *New Frontiers in CALL: Negotiating Diversity. Selected Proceedings of the XIII Annual JALT CALL SIG Conference 2008*. JALT CALL SIG, Japan, 2009.

---

1   More about this award, as well as other efforts of the University of Nottingham to engage its staff and students in the *Go Greener* campaign, can be found at: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/gogreener/gogreener.aspx.