Research Paper

Exploring the Evolution and Impact of Computer-Assisted Language Learning in Iran: An Exclusive Interview

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Abstract

For decades, language educators have sought innovative methods to improve language learning experiences, and the advent of technology has provided a revolutionary platform to accomplish this objective. Professor Marandi's pioneering work in CALL, particularly in Iran, exemplifies the power of combining cutting-edge technology with language pedagogy to produce effective and engaging learning environments. Professor Marandi shares her remarkable insights, challenges, and accomplishments throughout this interview. She provides a rare glimpse into the early days of establishing CALL in Iran and its impact on language learners and educators. Her contributions to the CALL literature have helped shape the discipline and advance language education in the Iranian context.

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Introduction

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the Technology Assisted Language Education Journal, which explores the innovative intersection between technology and language learning. In this inaugural issue, we proudly present an exclusive interview with Professor Seyyedeh Susan Marandi, a pioneer in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and the driving force behind its introduction in Iran.

CALL researchers continue to investigate new horizons, utilizing the potential of artificial intelligence, augmented reality, virtual classrooms, and mobile applications to revolutionize language learning methodologies. In this interview, Professor Marandi also reveals emerging trends and areas for future CALL research, providing valuable guidance to young Iranian CALL researchers aspiring to create a name for themselves in this dynamic field.

We hope this interview will motivate educators, researchers, policymakers, and language enthusiasts to investigate the vast potential of technology-assisted language education. As we embark on this journey of knowledge and discovery, we thank Professor Marandi for her commitment, foresight, and untiring efforts to advance CALL in Iran and beyond.

Join us as we delve into computer-assisted language learning (CALL), where technology and language education converge to shape the future of language education in Iran and pave the way for transformative pedagogical practices worldwide.

Editor: Welcome, Professor Marandi. We are pleased to have you here for this interview. As one of the prominent figures in Computer-Assisted Language Learning, we are eager to hear about your pioneering activities in Iran.

1-How did you become involved with Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and what inspired you to initiate CALL in Iran?

Hello. First of all, I'd like to thank you for your kind words, and for giving me this opportunity. To answer your question, I was a PhD candidate when I realized that CALL is very gradually becoming established as a sub-discipline under ELT. I had already been thinking about my future as an ELT professional after my PhD, and it was very important for me to "make a difference" and to be a pioneer at the forefront of changes, so I made a conscious decision that I would be the person who initiated CALL as a serious area of study in Iran. Back then, very few professors even knew how to use computers, and I was sure that CALL would become increasingly important, and I wanted to make sure that the Iranian ELT community would stay up-to-date.

At that time, there were very few CALL classes being offered worldwide, and none in Iran, so I did some research, and found some online classes, and ultimately I signed up for an online CALL class in St. Michael's College in Vermont, USA. That led

to my discovering and participating in other related classes; it also led to my practicing CALL in my own classes, and creating the first Iranian CALL courses at PhD and MA levels at Alzahra University. Later I was

able to add these courses as optional courses to the ministry-approved national PhD and MA programs, first in English and then other languages.

2- As one of the pioneers of CALL in Iran, what early obstacles did you encounter when introducing this technology in language education?

There were quite a few obstacles, but just to mention a very few of them: First, at the time our university (like most Iranian universities) only had one computer lab, and that was for the use of those who didn't have PCs at home, so we weren't allowed to use it for our classes. I had a great deal of difficulty persuading the authorities to allow me to hold my classes in the computer lab (I was even asked to pay a sum to do so)! Also, the concept of "IT helpdesk" didn't exist, so I was totally on my own whenever anything went wrong. Furthermore, Internet connections were dial-up connections back then, and were constantly disconnected and extremely slow; and power cuts also happened regularly.

On the other hand, and perhaps even more significantly, I received very little support from colleagues, and in fact received a great deal of backlash: One colleague (now long retired) would object to all CALL thesis proposals, and every single time and in almost every department meeting she would tell me, "You're doing a disservice to our students by introducing CALL. You're encouraging them to dream of something they can't have. This isn't the U.S. or Europe. This is Iran. These kids don't need computers. CALL will never be a thing in Iran. Why don't you teach them something useful instead?" I received similar backlash from colleagues from other universities when I brought up the issue at conferences or in meetings, as well. And the first time we tried to get the MA program in CALL approved by the ministry, it was said that CALL is a made-up discipline! Thankfully this attitude has largely changed over the years, ironically in part due to the recent pandemic.

Another major problem which persists to this day, however, is the filtering and blocking of websites, both by our own governments, and sometimes even more frequently by other governments, particularly the U.S. As you know, many websites, platforms, and applications which are freely available for use worldwide, are blocked by the American government for Iranian users. A similar difficulty has been the U.S.-led bank sanctions, which has caused many problems for those interested in CALL, as you can imagine. Nevertheless, my attitude has always been that almost nothing is impossible if you are determined and are willing to work hard enough for it, and I feel that such experiences, while often very discouraging, have gradually led me to become more creative, as well as more determined to make the most of each opportunity that arises. Such experiences

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have also helped me be more successful in helping others overcome their problems in attempting to practice CALL.

3-Could you describe some significant milestones and achievements on your path to promoting CALL in Iran?

I am happy to say I've had quite a few "firsts" in CALL, which has led to the honor of my being called the "mother of CALL" in Iran.

As far back as 2002, I co-authored and co-developed (with my sister, Sepedeh) one of the first Iranian language education CD-ROMs, English at Home, which took 2nd place prize at the First National Fair of Iranian Software. I presented the very first CALL-related speech in an Iranian conference, supervised the very first CALL theses and dissertations, and developed and taught the very first MA and PhD CALL courses for many years. Initially, these courses were only offered at Alzahra University, but after some years I succeeded in having them added to the national ministry-approved program, and not just for English, but for other languages, as well. I also chaired the first national Iranian conference with a CALL theme ("CALL for change in our language teaching") in 2010.

More recently, I have had the honor of establishing a master's degree in CALL for the first time in Iran (and the region) a few years ago, and we have been offering this program at Alzahra University ever since. This has led to a serious deepening and expanding of the horizons of CALL in Iran. (I'm currently engaged in working on the CALL PhD program.) Also, I have succeeded in establishing the very first Iranian "CALL Research Center" at Alzahra University, where we are equipped with the necessary facilities for simulations (VR, AR, XR, etc.), game-based learning, and so on. One of the software applications in use in this research center is Alzahra VR Academy, a Virtual Reality software I have co-developed for educational purposes.

4-Your publications have contributed substantially to the CALL literature. Could you describe your most influential works in this field?

It gives me pleasure to say that in addition to having supervised a wide range of CALL-related theses and dissertations, I also have 40+ CALL-related publications, and have published in journals such as Computer Assisted Language Learning; ReCALL; CALL-EJ; Computers and Education; Interactive Learning Environments; Australasian Journal of Educational Technology; The JALT CALL Journal; Educational Technology Research & Development; Language Learning and Technology; Computers in Human Behavior; and Learning, Media, and Technology. I have several book chapters, as well, including but not limited to a chapter in the book: CALL in limited technology contexts (Egbert et al., 2010, CALICO publications); and a chapter in Cambridge Handbook of Technology

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in Language Teaching and Learning (Stockwell & Wang, forthcoming, Cambridge University Press).

Although some of my older publications have received more citations (surpassing 100 citations), I am personally more invested in some of my more recent publications, particularly those which are related to the hegemonies of e-learning and CALL, since this is an extremely important and relevant topic which has been somewhat neglected. My latest publication in this regard (Marandi, 2023), entitled "Virtual supremacy and electronic imperialism: the hegemonies of e-learning and computer assisted language learning (CALL)," which has been published in the highly-revered journal, Learning, Media, and Technology, is very important for me, and I am hoping that it will help further shine the spotlight on this important topic.

I am also very proud of having had the great honor of contributing a chapter to Cambridge's forthcoming CALL handbook, which is now under publication and will hopefully be released later on this year.

5-What is your assessment of Iran's current CALL implementation? What effect has this had on language learners and educators so far?

I believe that we have made very great progress with regard to CALL overall; however, much of the progress appears to be limited to theory rather than practice. When I was studying CALL, I used to put everything I learned into practice immediately, but nowadays I see many advocates for CALL who limit themselves to declarative rather than procedural knowledge. They haven't actually experienced teaching language through the creative use of wikis, weblogs, podcasts, WebQuests, etc. Nor have they been actively involved in creating or even consistently using digital materials. At most, they have been using social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Instagram for sharing information, or they have been obliged to use some platforms such as Adobe Connect, Skype, etc. during the pandemic. Perhaps this is why many CALL studies are done without the actual implementation of any treatment requiring technology, and merely make use of attitude questionnaires, etc.

Furthermore, far too many people seem to believe that any kind of implementation of technology in language classes qualifies as CALL, and many equate their online experiences during the pandemic with CALL, whereas in most cases, what actually took place was Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and not CALL. The truth is, while the pandemic led to people recognizing the importance/inevitability of CALL more than before, it has also caused many language educators to gain a false sense of expertise with regard to using technology for language classes. This can actually have a very detrimental impact on CALL in the long run, since there are many issues to be taken into consideration when choosing how much & how we need to use technology for language learning/teaching, but many people are unaware of this, and now incorrectly consider

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themselves to be CALL experts. We need to promote CALL teacher education more, to create awareness that knowing a language plus being familiar with technology does not equal CALL.

Also, I believe we need to establish a more critical view toward CALL: For example, many people are either biased toward or against CALL; others still incorrectly believe that CALL is a teaching method; yet others give precedence to technology over pedagogy; etc. And so many people are unaware of the impact technology (ab)use can have on social and educational justice, and use the technologies indiscriminately, regardless of context, culture, etc. On a related note, in addition to becoming discerning consumers of technology, I believe it's also vital that we learn to become productive consumers, and that we ultimately create our own platforms, websites, applications, and digital materials.

6-What are some emerging trends in CALL that you find especially intriguing or promising as technology continues to evolve?

Personally, I find Web 3.0 to be very intriguing, although I also find it to be a bit scary, since there are some largely unexplored ethical issues which can arise, and for which the world is unprepared, particularly with regard to AI. I also believe that the chaos resulting from the rapid development of new technologies will impact pedagogy in a negative way for some time. Putting those concerns aside, however, I am looking forward to what several developments have to contribute to CALL (many overlap with others): The mainstreaming of simulation technologies, such as XR, virtual worlds, etc.; the possibilities of games and gamification; the possibilities of AI; Internet of Things (IoT) and wearable technologies; automated item generation (AIG); the usage of machine translation for language learning/teaching; etc.

7- What, in your opinion, are the most important areas of CALL that require additional research and development?

There are many intriguing topics for research, including the ones mentioned in response to your previous question. However, I feel very strongly about the necessity to work on CALL hegemonies and social/educational justice. A related topic which will become increasingly important as technology becomes more "intelligent" is that of the ethical concerns of using AI in education, as well as researching the role of "humanware" vs. that of software/hardware in CALL and e-learning. The validity/reliability of new forms of digital evaluation and e-assessment (whether formative or summative) is also of concern and requires much research, particularly as pertains to ethical concerns and fairness.

In addition to these topics, I am also a strong advocate for research on national standards for e-learning and CALL, and I further believe that special attention needs to

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be paid to the needs of the disabled in this regard (i.e., Universal Design for Learning for CALL in Iran), as well as the needs of underprivileged areas.

8-As a mentor and inspiration to many young CALL researchers in Iran, what advice would you give to those just beginning their endeavors in this field?

First, never use your very first experience with an unfamiliar technology as basis for research; give yourself time to become comfortable using it in class with your students, and then collect the data. Otherwise, the results may very likely be impacted by your inexperience. Also, whenever feasible, aim for mixed-method research which allows for a more complete picture. Furthermore, be realistic: Don't try to "prove" that adding a particular technology makes everything better. Instead, explore both the merits and demerits of any CALL situation.

9-How can Iranian CALL researchers collaborate with international experts and institutions to advance the field?

A good way to connect with international CALL researchers is to participate in major CALL conferences, such as the annual EuroCALL, International CALL Research, and CALICO conferences; or the WorldCALL conference (every five years).

10- How do you envision the future of CALL in Iran, and what function do you foresee it playing in language education?

In general, I am very hopeful for the future of CALL in Iran, since Iranians are very intelligent, as well as tech savvy. I also believe the recent addition of the master's program (and hopefully also the future doctoral program) in CALL will play a major role in furthering CALL teacher education and professional development, bringing about CALL 2.0 in Iran. I also firmly believe that people who obtain a degree in CALL will have a better chance of employment in the future than other ELT educators. That being said, it's very important that we consistently offer high quality CALL education; and not all the Iranian universities currently offering CALL courses are necessarily fully qualified to do so. This can be detrimental to the future of CALL in Iran if we're not careful.

11-How can policymakers and educational institutions effectively support the incorporation of CALL into language-learning curricula?

As you know, all reputable language institutes have compulsory Teacher Training Courses. And to teach language at schools or universities, you're expected to have a degree in language, preferably ELT. Similar attention needs to be paid to CALL; that is, institutes and universities should include a compulsory CALL course as part of language

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teacher education. This isn't just about digital literacy; technophiles and geeks aren't necessarily successful CALL teachers, just as not everyone who knows a language would be a good language teacher. Furthermore, policymakers need to provide the required facilities and support; and of course, providing guidelines can also be very helpful as long as they are regularly updated.

12-What final thoughts would you like to share with our readers about the potential and influence of CALL in transforming language education in Iran?

The future of language education is undoubtedly CALL. It might not always be called by that name; the technologies might not always be the ones we employ today; however, there's no doubt that education will ultimately become completely intertwined with technology. Furthermore, as an interdisciplinary field of study, CALL allows for a wide range of collaborations with other disciplines, and encourages entrepreneurship. For these and many other reasons, I would strongly advise anyone interested in language education as a profession to engage in learning more about CALL theories and practice.

Thank you for sharing your valuable insights and experiences with us. Your contributions to the CALL field have been remarkable, and we are excited to see the continued growth and development of technology-assisted language education in Iran.

Once more, thank you very much for this opportunity. I am also looking forward to the development of a more mature and comprehensive approach to technology-assisted language education in Iran, and believe that a collective, concerted effort in this regard can easily result in Iran becoming one of the leading countries in this regard, despite all the difficulties and even the extra discriminations that Iranian academics often face.

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