

## RELC 2009 by Paul Wiseman

I recently attended the 44th Regional Language Centre (RELC) seminar in Singapore, where they take their education very seriously indeed. RELC has an impeccable pedigree: the seminar was opened by the Thai ambassador to Singapore and the opening ceremony was attended by several other ambassadors and a swag of high level dignitaries. The theme was The Impact of Technology on Language Learning and Teaching: What, How and Why. "The RELC International Seminar is a major event in language education in the region. It is held annually and is attended by some 500 participants – mainly scholars, lecturers, curriculum developers and educationists from the region as well as from other parts of the world." (<http://www.relc.org.sg/seminar.html>)

What did I learn? Well, I learnt a new word – affordance! And visuality! I learnt how to set up my own website. I learnt about Blended Learning, E-motivation through the use of blogging and Facebook. I learnt about the Hawthorne Effect. I learnt that the greatest minds in education still stuff up their Powerpoint presentations. I examined the latest developments in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and browsed recent publications of some of the best known publishers of ESL books. I had my prejudices and preconceptions on the limitations of technology confirmed. I was invited to apply for jobs in Vietnam, Brunei and Indonesia. I met delightful colleagues from all over the world. I loved it.

The programme consisted of lectures by invited speakers, three running concurrently over 4 slots of one hour, presentations by participants, up to nine running concurrently over 6 forty minute slots, and on the Monday and Tuesday at the end of the day up to 12 ninety minute workshops running concurrently.

I was only able to hear 4 of the 12 invited speakers but the RELC-supplied booklet of abstracts gave a good idea of what I missed. The trend among the speakers was heavily biased towards the use of internet-based learning. According to my analysis of the abstracts, seven of the twelve lectures were exclusively concerned with this. Only three were concerned exclusively with specific Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). One was concerned with the use of podcasting which is basically an internet technology anyway, and one was too abstract and incomplete to be classified either way.

This bias was mirrored in the other presentations and workshops. Of the fifty odd parallel sessions only 6 were devoted to CALL pure and simple, with the same sort of proportions in the workshops. This means the answer to the questions posed in the title of the seminar ... What, How and Why ... is simple. It's the Internet, along with Wikis, Wikipedia, Blogs, Chats, Ipods. This is frustrating for countries, such as Indonesia, where Internet access is often problematical, but they'll catch up. I would say that this does not bode well for the future of specific CALL software. Why would you spend a fortune buying software that may or may not be suitable for your students when your colleagues around the world are achieving excellent results by using the huge amount of freeware available on the net?

I tended to avoid lectures by native speakers. In my experience those who have themselves learnt English as a second language communicate better, without slang, jargon and self-advertisement. My first was Jörg Roche from LMU München on technology and language learning who looked at the development of CALL with something less than enthusiasm, pointing out that much of the material is based on pedagogical principles that are generations old (audio-lingual, grammar translation) and that developers know only how to entertain, not to teach. He made a point that I was to hear repeated throughout the conference: the most useful tools for learning a language on the net were not actually designed for ELT. He also issued a strong warning on the importance of guidance of students by teachers: "on their own they will drown." He pointed to <http://www.deutsch-uni.com> as an example of a successful language learning site. Looks good to me, although he did say that in his opinion the state of CALL development and hardware and software deficiencies made it hard to justify large investment by schools.

Stephen J. Hall of Sunway University College Malaysia spoke under the title "Let's Facebook it: teachers losing the literacy battle as games gain." This was an excellent presentation but I'm still having trouble with reference to multiple literacies. I think it all began with economic literacy. Now we have emotional literacy, informational literacy, digital literacy, multiliteracies. Can I have my literacy back? I mean the skill of being able to read and write. When I use the word literacy I don't want to be asked what sort of literacy I mean. Anyway, Stephen J. Hall spoke about some of the problems associated with internet use. He used the term oracy (long loathed by me) but in the sense of "spoken language going into written text" which seems to me to be quite a useful coinage. His theme was basically the theme of the seminar – teachers are stuck with the internet so they'd better take charge.

The next invited speaker, Joy Egbert of Washington State University, which is apparently in the United States of America, reconfirmed my prejudices against native-speaking speakers. "Affordances, and opportunities: engagement, real language and critical thinking in CALL environments." Where did they get this word? No less than four of the native-speaking speakers used it. It doesn't appear in the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, nor in the online Merriam-Webster, Oxford or Cambridge. Of course, you can find it if you look hard enough. The word was coined by a psychologist (enough to make me suspicious), J. J. Gibson in 1977. However, he did say "scientific psychology seems to me ill-founded" so he can't have been too bad. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J.\\_J.\\_Gibson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._J._Gibson)) I won't bother giving the definition of the word: who but an academic phony would ever use it? And remember, Wikipedia is not always reliable.

Ms Egbert began with a jocular reference to "death by Powerpoint" and then proceeded to inflict not just death, but wilful murder by Powerpoint. We all gazed at the screen but the video just would not download. Her presentation seemed to consist of statements of the obvious. Students are affected by their environment, abilities, motivations and opportunities. Teachers must supply those opportunities. She did make a very useful point – the importance of air-conditioning in the classroom. I did note the following assertion, "Many teachers ignore their students as people." Naturally she referred to "literacies" and "multiliteracies" and that's where I got "visuality". Thanks, Joy. She presented a lesson plan Saving the environment through comics. It seems to me that we should be expecting more of 11yr olds than 5 word speech bubbles. Half way through we got more of the video, or rather we didn't get more of the video but were invited to look at the website later. I note that Ms Egbert's References included five to her own work. That will do something for her citation rankings.

Later I attended "Investigating the use of Wikipedia among students of Andalas University" by Hanafi and Dian Rianita, Andalas University, Indonesia. This interesting presentation revealed that many of the speakers' students use Wikipedia as their sole source of material, do not question its reliability and frequently fail to acknowledge it as a source and commit blatant plagiarism by cutting and pasting or paraphrasing. Here I was introduced to the Hawthorne effect – respondents to surveys say what they think the researchers want them to say and reminded of the importance of imposing limits on students' internet use and the added importance of directing students to books.

My second invited speaker was Chan Wai Meng of the National University of Singapore. He was one of the few to focus exclusively on CALL. I am afraid here also was if not death at least disablement by Powerpoint. However, it all came right in the end and we were able for once to see, in sound and vision, real students. His theme was the importance of training students in the effective use of CALL materials. He detailed this process in an excellent handout, listing steps for students to take before, during and after their CALL exercises. Unfortunately, the exemplifying program (tasks in German) seemed to me to be irredeemably boring and old-fashioned.

Next I attended a presentation by Ao Ran, National Institute of Education, Singapore. This was a comparison of the various CDROMs accompanying various advanced learner's dictionaries. In my experience students never use these so the analysis was a bit of a waste of time. The amazing proliferation of online dictionaries has rendered them obsolete anyway, at least for those who have internet connections. I was disappointed that no-one at the whole seminar said a word about handheld electronic dictionaries which have become extremely popular among my students.

A presentation by Satriya Ony Firmanto from LBBP Surabaya on using Microsoft Learning Essentials was an eye-opener. This is a huge collection of resources available on the internet but only through MS Encarta. I have a 1997 version and this gave me access. There are a huge number of templates for lesson planning, worksheets and all sorts of graphic. I was fascinated by the Substitute Teacher Instructions which includes a space for Earthquake Drill, something sadly lacking in my own document. There are numerous charts, diagrams, admin, assessment and grading documents. I recommend a look. I had never before heard of Google Scholar, which is also worth a look.

I attended only one of the workshops: "Multiply: designing your free e-learning and digital resource sharing portal", Dominic Kenneth Wee, Zhenghua Secondary School, Singapore. This was a very practical session in one of the RELC computer rooms, with assistance provided by Dominic's own students. I set up my own website! Multiply is like Facebook but easier to use and with more storage, and apparently unlimited space for photos.

Dominic's session tied in nicely with a parallel session I attended on the last day of the conference: "Using blogs to enable independent learning," by Joyce Lim, Susan Soh & Roger Spelmer from Hwa Chong Institution, Singapore. In this school the curriculum for 13 year olds embodies compulsory blogging with the

aim of improving writing and critical thinking. The process is tightly controlled. Students are thoroughly prepared, pre-tested, work on analysis of racist bloggers and generally warned of dangers attached to blogging. There is a class blogging policy and a parental consent form. Students are expected to post 20 blogs a term with photos and video. Teachers are expected to initiate exchanges, 'model, supervise and oversee.' Teachers do not overtly correct language but encourage students to edit both their own work and the work of their fellows. Questions were raised about the extra workload on teachers with large classes. This was alleviated by appointing student leaders from computer geeks within the classes. I asked about negative experiences and hostility to the programme and was told there were none. I was greeted with disbelief when I told the speakers that students at my school are forbidden to use the school network for blogging on pain of dismemberment and death. A quote from the abstract: 'The creation of a community of learners ensures that students are the focal point of the community where they interact, engage and learn while teachers accept a dethroned position as participants in the community.'

The last invited speaker I heard Françoise Raby from Grenoble, France who gave a delightfully dotty lecture on "The manifold impact of technology on instructed foreign language learning and teaching: how the past accounts for the future." Like most speakers on educational technology Ms Raby came a complete cropper with Powerpoint, wasting at least 20 minutes of her allotted hour by stuffing up the technology. Never mind, her talk was supremely entertaining in a uniquely French philosophical way. She contrasted a positive, 'millenarian, utopian' view of technology with the negative, 'doom-laden' view. She actually said nothing at all about technology but instead referred repeatedly to the myth of Prometheus and Frankenstein – 'ancient myths influence our view of ICT.' She pointed out that since all countries are culturally distinct the impact of ICT will be different. She asserted that art was the cradle of technology and in an optimistic note held out the possibility of a new era that celebrates communication and cooperation. I was sorry she did not have time to explain her 'new research paradigm'. She promised a transcript of her complete lecture but never supplied one.

The seminar ended with a panel discussion by the invited speakers in the auditorium. This was mostly harmless waffle interesting to me chiefly as a study in body language as the pushier speakers struggled for the microphone. The aforementioned Joyce Egbert was the champion here, managing to hog the floor no less than five times.

My conclusions? This is a worthwhile seminar for any thinking teacher, especially from Western Australia. I was reminded that English has not for years been the exclusive property of the Anglos (or Anglo-Celts as we call them in Australia). For years native speakers have enjoyed an easy ride as a birthright but I think times are changing. Furthermore, speaking to polyglot colleagues at the seminar made me realise the absurdity of employing teachers of ESL who do not speak a foreign language and have never made a serious study of one. It's like employing a driving instructor who can't drive.

Another message I took away was that when my my colleagues from overseas talk about the new technology they basically mean the internet and have embraced it while at the same time made every effort to regulate it. Of course if you don't have the infrastructure they have in Singapore you may find yourself rather limited. Our present school network is about as much use as a bowl of cold spaghetti, but this will improve and we may want to reconsider our policy on blogging. I have been questioning our Intensive English Centre students recently on their use of computers and have discovered an astonishingly high percentage of them have access to the internet at home. Perhaps this could be harnessed by teachers in the cause of literacy.

I rediscovered also the pitfalls of Powerpoint, how rare are the speakers who use it well and how common are those who over-rely on it and generally abuse it.

Finally, let me repeat the cautionary and poignant words of Jörg Roche from LMU München: "on their own they will drown."