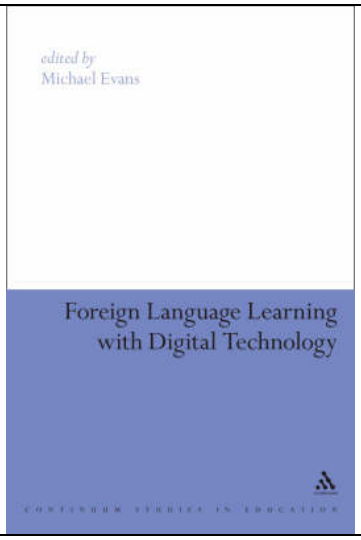
REVIEW OF *FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY*

Foreign Language Learning with Digital Technology Edited by Michael Evans 2009 ISBN: 978-1-4411-0441-0 US $44.95 210 pp. Continuum London, UK	

Review by Elodie Vialleton, The Open University, UK

This edited volume centers on the two main areas of digital technologies and pedagogy and of classroom language learning through a collection of eight chapters contributed by academics and practitioners from the UK, the USA and Australia. Apart from the first chapter which offers a literature review on digital technology and language learning, all seven remaining chapters report on specific projects, using a range of approaches; some are descriptive, some are accounts of case studies, and others present the outcomes of long-term research projects. Together, they touch on several different themes pertaining to digital technologies and language learning (e.g., the source of language learning materials and their authenticity, teacher and learner perspectives, questions of methodologies and pedagogy, modes of communication and features of interactions in language learning, digital tools for language learning, and face-to-face, online and blended learning and distance teaching).

In his introduction, editor Michael Evans starts by discussing the choice of his title between "digital technology" or "information and communication technology" (ICT). He explains that the former is mainly used in the USA, while the latter is preferred in the UK, and that in the book, as in this review, they are used interchangeably. The introduction then defines the rationale underlying the book; it is made up of "accounts, examples and descriptions of effective ways in which the technology can enhance language teaching and learning aims, all concerned with qualitative accounts of how the digital environment affects language learners and language learning" (p. 2). Rather than focusing on one particular set of language learners, the book presents a variety of perspectives covering many types of language learners: secondary school pupils, university students and trainee teachers (of modern languages or EFL), and face-to-face or distance learning. For Evans the common thread that brings all the chapters together is the notion of integration, as all the authors, whatever their domains, explore how to embed technology in language teaching and learning.

In the first chapter, Evans presents a highly informative review of literature that covers policy on the use of ICT in language education and evidence of its impact in schools, as well as applied linguistics research on the impact of e-learning on language learners. The chapter starts by looking at key policy documents that provide guidelines or set standards as to the use of digital technologies in language education in the USA and in England. It then examines evidence of the impact of ICT use in schools. Findings from

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studies in England, for example, found a link between high use of ICT and levels of attainment and a positive impact on student motivation. There was evidence from Ofsted in 2004 that high ICT use was detrimental to the quantity of target language use in the classroom, but Evans suggests this is changing as technology is now increasingly used as a vehicle in productive tasks. Similar evidence from the USA and Australia is then reviewed. The next part of this chapter is dedicated to a review of evidence from the field of applied linguistics and the CALL literature. Although Evans mentions research providing overviews on the topic, he points out that much of the literature focuses on small-scale experimental studies in adult and higher education; he defines the value of such research as providing "qualitative and often detailed accounts of the processes by which technology can support language learning" (p.18). The review is structured using terminology defined by Warschauer (1996) and Gruba (2004) to account for differences of approach in CALL: structural CALL (where the evidence seems to be that the methodology is more critical to success than the media), communicative CALL (mainly concerned with research in computer-mediated communication, or CMC, used to develop fluency, strategies and intercultural competence), and integrative CALL (covering the development of multiple language skills or blended modes of learning in collaborative activities). He concludes the chapter by stating that "there has been a growing rapprochement between the two perspectives [education research and applied linguistics research] in recent years" (p. 27) and argues that "language teaching and learning, at all levels, can benefit from the mediation of technology" (p. 28). This thorough review provides a full picture of the context of the projects presented in the following chapters, and it defines key terms in the subject area and gives a theoretical grounding for the whole volume. In itself this chapter would be extremely useful reading for any student or practitioner interested in exploring the field of digital technologies for language learning.

The second chapter of the book by Iain Mitchell is very different from the first one. Rather than focusing on theory and research, it presents a selection of engaging language learning materials based on Internet resources. The chapter provides concrete examples of classroom activities that can be developed with these materials. It suggests that the Internet offers a range of sources (news websites, commercial websites, websites for young people, culturally authentic websites) which make it possible to locate several types of stimuli (texts, audio files, videos, etc.), which in turn can be used in a variety of ways (to develop vocabulary, to practice reading and listening skills, to get exposure to authentic language and develop language awareness, and to use as a background or starting point for authentic tasks or cultural information). The chapter includes examples of documents found on the Internet and detailed suggestions about how they can be exploited in different settings, at different levels and to work on different objectives. Mitchell concludes with two important remarks that are actually relevant to the whole volume: "just as much as the appropriate choice of material, it is how the material is exploited that is crucial" and it can only be effective if it is "integrated into an overall philosophy of second-language pedagogy and acquisition" (p. 59). This chapter would be a helpful source of inspiration for any language teacher investigating how to make use of the Internet in the language classroom.

Chapter 3 by Linda Fisher reports on the results of a longitudinal study charting the evolution of the perception of digital technologies by five trainee teachers over nine months of their training course at a UK university. It considers their beliefs about ICT before they started teaching and finds that the prevailing attitude was nervousness and apprehension. It then looks at the influence of the subject culture in the departments in which they did placements and shows that it was an important factor in their learning. It then lists ways in which ICT fits with language pedagogy, and reports on cautions expressed by the trainees as their course progressed, to do mostly with a need for balance in the way ICT is integrated to learning. The chapter concludes by showing that by the end of the nine months, the five trainees had developed into enthusiastic and competent users of technology committed to continue using it because they were convinced of its pedagogic fit.

The author of Chapter 4, Rachel Hawkes, defines her own work as "an action-research ethnography" and "an analytical narrative of the ongoing development of ICT use in one modern-languages department"

(p. 80). Using data collected during classroom observations and staff and student interviews, it describes an example of the implementation and use of ICT for language teaching as integrated into a pedagogy of active learning. It shows how the use of digital technologies was used as a pivot to develop a new learning environment and strategy for the whole department and touches on themes such as L2 interaction, grammar teaching, learning styles, assessment, classroom management and authenticity. In the second part it discusses the use of ICT (email, video and blogging) beyond the classroom. The chapter demonstrates that ICT use was instrumental to improve the attainment and motivation of pupils, although the reader may wonder if the improvement was not due as much to the careful thinking about pedagogy and teaching strategies that is described in the chapter as to the actual recourse to ICT.

Chapter 5, like Chapter 1, was written by the editor. It reports on a research project which evaluated a CMC program, Tic-Talk, which engaged language learners from schools based in different countries in online activities. The aim was to see how much the pupils could learn from each other through online discussions. Evans first focuses on program and task design, then turns to the analysis of interactions and of the perceptions of the participants. This shows that pupils had mixed views about whether their language had improved as a result of the experience, but that most valued the possibility of communicating with others. There was evidence that the tasks provided opportunities for reading practice that could be exploited by the teacher beyond the online exchanges, and a chance to practise a different genre of written communication from communicative writing in the classroom. In the conclusion, two issues are raised that need further consideration: the role of the instructor in such programs, and the difficulties that arise when participation is poor. The latter links to the statement that a liberal attitude to the choice of L1, L2 and code-switching by participants is key to guarantee good participation and the success of experiments like Tic-Talk.

The focus of Chapter 6, by Cal Durrant, is a historical overview of the development of distance education in Australia. It considers the development of Australian identities through the example of language teaching in Western Australia at the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE). It is fascinating to read about the development of strategies and technologies for distance teaching, starting all the way from the era of pioneers and finishing in 2008, but the chapter would have benefited from more distance, ironically, with the setting and from comparisons with tools for and implementation of the distance teaching of languages at other institutions around the world, for example by including references to publications by Cynthia White from Massey University (White, 2003, 2006), by Börge Holmberg in Sweden and Germany (Holmberg, Shelley, & White, 2005) or by my own colleagues from the Open University in the UK (Coleman, Hampel, Hauck, & Stickler, 2010).

Chapter 7, by Miranda Hamilton, returns to the theme of perceptions and describes the experience of students and teachers involved in two projects integrating synchronous and asynchronous CMC within a virtual learning environment for an English Language teaching program at a language school in the UK. The analysis confronts the participants' preconceptions and priorities before starting the programme, during the project, and in their follow-up responses. She concludes that "the ability to conceptualize, make sense of and cognitively map the pedagogical merits of their technological teaching and learning environment seems to have been linked most strongly to 'a personally held system of beliefs, values and principles'" (pp. 172-173). The chapter therefore highlights the importance of understanding the background and beliefs of participants to inform future developments.

In the final chapter, Carl Blyth considers the ecology of foreign-language publishing in the era of ICT. Within the general framework of Open Educational Resources (OER), the chapter presents a case study of the development of two French language courses at the University of Texas at Austin (UTA) and the gradual move from book-based to online materials. The author argues that the development of digital technologies and open publishing are resulting in the production of more learner-centered and user-friendly materials. The chapter first defines notions such as ecology, open source and open access, and it considers open education as a knowledge ecosystem. It reviews some examples of open source

educational content, then turns to the description of the stages of development of the UTA French courses and analyzes the underlying principles of successive versions. It highlights the developers' need to strike a balance between "what they believed students needed […] and what students said they wanted" (p. 188) by involving students in the development process. Blyth argues that this resulted in a change of content and improvement in usability which placed the students at the center of the learning experience.

Seen as a whole, the book covers the field of digital technology for language learning from many different angles. It considers all the actors of the language learning process—pupils, students, teachers, facilitators, materials designers—and a range of tools and objects involved in the process. It starts from theoretical considerations that are provided through a literature review spanning both education research and applied linguistics, and it moves to the description of empirical implementations in different settings. It provides quantitative evidence and discusses qualitative research about some projects. Although the target audience for the book is not explicitly defined by the editor, its focus on practical accounts of ICT use in language teaching and learning, rather than on research methodologies, makes it a useful reference for classroom practitioners and trainee teachers. Rather than bringing diverse projects and perspectives together through theory, it embarks its readers on the open-ended exploration of an exciting multi-dimensional field.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Elodie Vialleton is Head of French at the Open University, UK. Her research interests include the use of authentic spoken materials in language teaching, the development of listening and speaking skills, and technology-enhanced language learning. She is a translator and published author of language textbooks.

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