

REVIEW OF *TECHNOLOGY ENHANCED LANGUAGE LEARNING: CONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE*

Technology Enhanced Language Learning: Connecting Theory and Practice

Aisha Walker and Goodith White

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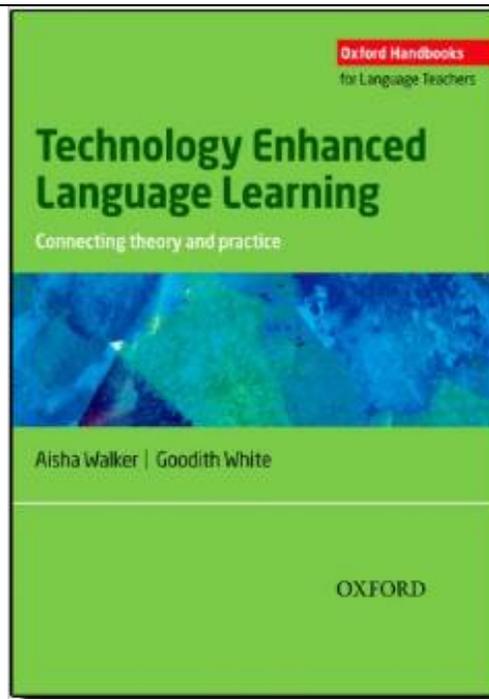
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Review by Jeffrey S. Moore, Bowling Green State University

As the title suggests, Walker and White's book, *Technology Enhanced Language Learning: Connecting Theory and Practice*, sets out to bridge the gap the authors believe exists in theoretical work on how technology can function within the context of second language instruction, and how instructors can use technology to enliven and engage their students. They believe one of the primary reasons the gap exists is because instructors may feel intimidated by changes in technology, or more accurately, that instructors are unable to keep up with the changes in technology as quickly as their students can, and thus are not comfortable integrating as wide a range of technologies into their lessons (e.g., YouTube videos or audio recording and editing programs). To this end, the book functions more as a how-to guide for instructors who are not accustomed to using technology in their classrooms than it does as a reference guide for research about Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).

The majority of the book's twelve chapters are structured the same, with each addressing a different topic of language learning. The book begins with an introductory section with suggestions on how and why to integrate technology that speaks directly to instructors who are unaccustomed to having technology play a major role in their classroom. Each chapter is further divided into summaries of relevant research into how technology assists in the learning of the given topic area, sections describing technologies that can aid in the learning process, and suggestions for how to integrate those technologies into classroom instruction. This structure is useful as it allows instructors to draw from sections that are most relevant to their classes, though it gives the impression that there is an inherent separation between skill sets--that one cannot, for example, use technology to strengthen oral or aural fluency while also making gestures towards reading comprehension or vocabulary building. The authors make clear in the introduction that they do not see this as being the case, but this point could have been made clearer throughout, as a portion of Walker and White's target audience – someone who is unfamiliar or uncomfortable with technology –

may only be using the book in a piecemeal way to enhance classroom activities, and may not immediately see connections between topic areas.

Chapter 1 sets the tone for the book by discussing how people learn a second language and how technology can enhance this process. More so than any other, this chapter makes the case that instructors should not be afraid to use or experiment with technology, despite any personal shortcomings they may feel regarding the use of any given piece of technology, because it can only help to advance their students' understanding of English. The authors discuss technology through the lens of the tutor, tutee, tool model, as developed by Taylor (1980), which posits that technology serves different roles at different points in the learning process, and that students can move between these roles as needed. The authors discuss authoring software as an example of the tutor role, as this type of software allows instructors to create customized exercises or drills that can be reused by multiple students at multiple proficiency levels, and can be accessed from home or in an institutional setting. The tool role, broadly defined by the authors, is any interaction through which technology is used to accomplish a task. This can be using a computer to check spelling errors in a written assignment, using a vocabulary drill game on a smartphone or tablet, or using audio or video editing equipment to create a class presentation. The tutee role – in which the student “teaches” something to the technology – is not as well defined or explained as the tutor or tool roles, though the authors suggest this may be a more effective method of learning as it requires the student to construct knowledge through trial and error. The authors see the tutor, tutee, tool model as an example of Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), which they see as preferable to CALL because TELL allows for multiple teaching approaches to be used, which leads to the creation of a learning environment where technology helps boost student performance without students becoming wholly reliant upon technology to create language.

Chapter 3 is a typical example of how most of the chapters in this book function. The chapter sticks to a given topic area, listening and speaking in this case, and lays out a series of skills students need to acquire to improve their language proficiency, along with a series of technology-enhanced lesson ideas designed to help students improve those skills. One of the real strengths of the book is that many of the class exercise suggestions make use of existing Internet technologies; that is, the class exercises are based upon tools that can be found for free online. This is an especially important note since Walker and White are targeting an audience they perceive as less familiar and/or comfortable with technology in the classroom. The authors realize that an instructor who can quickly and easily access a new piece of technology is going to be much more likely to learn how to use that technology, and will feel more comfortable teaching others how to use that technology. An example of this is the authors' suggestion to use chatterbots, also known as chatter robots or chatbots, as a means of language practice and improvement. Chatterbots are computer programs designed to analyze text and formulate responses similar to those people would give during a casual conversation. Numerous free chatterbot programs and websites can be found online, and users often need only a few basic pieces of equipment such as an Internet enabled computer and a microphone to use them. Though more complex speech recognition and response programs undoubtedly exist on the commercial market, these free Internet-based programs allow users without the benefit of a technology-rich institution to practice English and give instructors an outlet for students to practice outside the classroom with technology they may already possess. The goal here is to acclimate users to new ideas and new ways of learning, and suggestions like chatterbots provide a means for exploration across language proficiency and technology comfort levels.

Perhaps the two most important chapters in the book are Chapter 9: Assessment, and Chapter 10: Teachers Using Technology. As the titles suggest, these two chapters deal with how to evaluate and assign grades for assignments built around or completed using new forms of technology, and deciding what skills an instructor needs to acquire in order to comfortably use technology in their classroom. In addition to suggestions for class exercises enhanced by technology, Chapter 9 examines the benefits and disadvantages of using technology in language learning. The authors suggest that technology has much to

lend to the field of assessment in terms of diagnostics, course placements, quality assurance and determining future learning opportunities based on these qualities. Though the tone and topic of the book show they fall on the side of technology as a benefit to both instructors and students, Walker and White do acknowledge that technology in the language learning classroom has its drawbacks, such as the inability to judge student progress and skill holistically, or errors that may commence from program spelling and grammar checks that a human would be more attuned to. To those for whom technology is a new tool among the many used to teach a new language, this chapter is indispensable as it provides a framework for deciding what technologies are the most beneficial. What the chapter does not do, however, is provide teachers with information about how to assess the quality of assignments completed with new technologies. The authors do not spend sufficient time discussing how to evaluate an assignment completed using audio editing software, for example. Those instructors who may be looking for guidance on how to judge the performance of their more technologically adept students may be disappointed by this omission.

It may seem like overstating the obvious, but Chapter 10 focuses on the need for instructors to have basic competence in computer usage and function, and more than a cursory understanding of any software programs, websites, or hardware being used in a classroom or lab setting. Walker and White advocate a method of technology acquisition based on a skills pyramid, in which instructors build on skills as they acquire them in order to achieve a level of mastery that allows them to develop their own creative way of using and teaching students how to use technology. This emphasis on developing skills is not unlike the way many students acquire a new language, building on skills to create more fluency and comprehension, and it serves as a good analogy for those looking to improve their technological proficiency. Given, however, that the book is aimed at an audience that is reluctant to learn or adopt new technologies as part of their pedagogy, it seems strange that this chapter would be reserved until so late in the book. In terms of establishing the relevance of the work within the field, it may have been more prudent to lead with this section rather than saving it for those who, presumably, have acquired some level of knowledge by reading through the preceding chapters.

Ultimately, Walker and White's book succeeds at being what it was written to be – a self-help guide for instructors who want to incorporate more technology into their language learning classrooms but are unsure how to proceed – and those who may be interested in the book would be wise to keep this in perspective. For those to whom technology is not seen as a burden or cause for fear, or those who already have more than a passing knowledge of the Internet, *Technology Enhanced Language Learning: Connecting Theory and Practice* is unlikely to be of substantial assistance. Similarly, instructors looking for ready-made lesson plans that take advantage of technology may find the book wanting, for while there are suggestions made throughout, the book devotes more space to providing a theoretical background for technology inclusion than it does to offering exemplar lesson plans. The book can be useful if placed in the right hands and within the right context, but those looking for a more general use handbook should look elsewhere.

REFERENCES

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