

## REVIEW OF *LEARNING LANGUAGES THROUGH TECHNOLOGY*

### Learning Languages through Technology

Elizabeth Hanson-Smith & Sarah Rilling, Eds.

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### Review by Carmen Tomas, [Nottingham Trent University](#)

*Learning Languages through Technology*, edited by Elizabeth Hanson-Smith and Sarah Rilling, examines language learning and technology covering a wide range of technological applications from e-mail, chats, blogs, and the use of multimedia. It also has geographic representation from different regions including the Americas, Europe, and Asia and includes examples from both secondary and tertiary education.

Previous books have also captured the pervasive role of technologies in language learning (Cameron, 1999; Dudeney & Hockly, 2007; Richardson, 2006), but this book places special emphasis on the practitioner's perspective. Each chapter contains a chapter preview and initial questions, theoretical underpinnings, and application and implementation. Each chapter contains a theoretical rationale for the activities designed that address principles of language learning and also establish the role of technology. However, the most interesting part in each chapter is how the practitioners relate their experiences sharing their good practices as well as the reality and challenges of implementing any technology-related initiative, which is an aspect that will be useful to others learning to plan activities. The chapters reveal how to deal with typical issues such as resource scarcity, time constraints, and technical help as well as issues of a different nature such as poor student engagement. The chapters include academic style accounts, narratives and practical guidance, all of which make practitioners new to the use of technologies an appropriate audience.

The volume is divided into four sections detailed below. Each section contains a number of chapters and ends with a chapter on a special issue. This end of each section addresses important questions that emerge from the practice discussed in that section (e.g., student engagement, autonomy, or the teacher's role). Each section ends with further questions for reflection and resources for practitioners.

Elizabeth Hanson-Smith and Sarah Rilling introduce the book in the Chapter 1. They describe parameters of good practice in language learning and describe the field of CALL as mature on the grounds of the acumen of research in this field, which raises the expectation that the chapters are informed by research.

The first section, *Language Development Online: Skill Building through Technology*, contains five chapters dealing with key language learning skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening. Dafne Gonzalez in Chapter 2 deals with speaking and the role of chat rooms for communicative learning. Technology's role in this case is to add connectivity with real international audiences by providing motivation and an incentive for students to practice the target language. This chapter provides a lot of

detail on how to organise activities using the medium in an effective way (jigsaw activities, video chat, online presentations, and international guests). Marti Sevier in Chapter 3 presents the use of a concordancing tool (Compleat lexical tutor) for reading and vocabulary development in the context of reading. In Chapter 4 Randi Reppen and Camilla Vasquez present a broad range of tools to support foreign language students in academic writing. They present the development of an online module to support a range of writing sub-skills: paraphrasing with the use of colours, use of referencing, evaluating online sources, and grammar and adverbials using concordancers. In-Seok Kim in Chapter 5 addresses listening skills via a Web-based listening course. This chapter contains practical descriptions of the process of designing and implementing the course. The course includes a range of tools to develop listening: matching images and oral descriptions; video lectures on sounds; and the use of transcripts. The chapter unfolds covering skills other than listening and presents a full course that encompasses all skills (reading in Hot Potatoes, ancillary visual resources, writing in bulletin boards). The section finishes with Thomas Robb (Chapter 6) discussing the issue of technology and non-autonomous learners. This is an interesting reflection on the problem of independent learning brought about by technology use. The proposed solution is enhanced tracking of student activity.

The second section is *Content-Based and Task-Based Learning: Collaborative CALL*. Theresa J. Kennedy in Chapter 7 describes the use of an Internet-based programme for Science teaching. Through a range of activities, schools can communicate across the world with other schools and look at other countries' data, hold international videoconferences and chats. In Chapter 8, Bernard Susser describes a range of word processing and Internet browsing related activities in the context of Tourism, Culture and Technology. The activities cover Internet-based reading, use of word processing to structure essays, Web searches, concordancers, communication via e-mail, and creating brochures. Nicolas Gromik in Chapter 9 presents a project-oriented activity in which students make a movie. The chapter includes many tips and practical guidelines on how to structure activities and assessment. Sarah Rilling in Chapter 10 considers the role of the teacher as facilitator in English for special purposes and how to provide feedback to help students. She describes the importance of helping students identify errors with the use of colour codes and the use of e-mail as a communication tool. Future developments are the use of bulletin boards and concordancers. Maggie Sokolik in Chapter 11 reports on students expectations of technology. The chapter reports on a survey of students' use of technology and their perceptions of their teachers' aptitude and use of technologies. The chapter concludes with a set of goals to improve use of technologies for communication with students, help students evaluate material, and create more variety in the classroom.

The third section covers *Authentic Audience in a Web-Based World*. In Chapter 12 Teresa Almeida Eca exemplifies the use of technologies from simple to complex applications. She starts with the use of e-mail and goes on to describe authoring tools (Hot Potatoes) and ends with exploring blogs and net-based exercises. Mary Jewell in Chapter 13 proposes the creation of brochures in an authentic context with the use of generic tools such as PowerPoint and Word with the use of templates. Graham Stanley (Chapter 14) is written differently from other chapters that are written as narratives and instead more directly reports tips for the effective use of blogs derived from his own experience. The chapter also explores the affordances of the tool in relation to language learning. Latricia Trites (Chapter 15) presents the dilemmas faced by the teacher and the amount of tutor input. The chapter also incorporates, in a narrative style, the decisions made in the design of a course.

The fourth section focuses on *Constructivism in Professional Development*. Anne Dahlman and Sarah Tahtinen show the creation of a network of teachers in their first year after training (Chapter 16). The network is established via e-mail exchanges, e-forum (to support with interaction) and a Web site to support with resources. Klaus Gommlich and Theresa Minick (Chapter 17) present the creation and design of a Master's degree in teacher education. It incorporates a project in which training teachers develop a module for students online. This hands-on project is valued by trainee teachers as it ends with reflection and evaluation of the experience. In Chapter 18, Andreas Schramm and Ann Mabbott present

generic considerations in converting a face-to-face traditional course to online and describes programme level and management issues. Vance Stevens (Chapter 19) narrates the development in the past decade of the Webheads in action. It describes how teachers can put into practice things they learnt in a Web-based community of practice by addressing the challenge of the paucity of skills sometimes found in educational settings.

Generally, the book will serve practitioners well who seek to start using and integrating technologies in their teaching. The strength of the book is the communication of practitioner experiences that will help others plan in advance to set realistic goals. Providing such descriptive and practical information was a challenging aspect to convey in this written format. Most chapters provide narratives, contextual descriptions and guidelines. However, the balance between these elements is varied in different chapters.

The scope of the book is broad as it goes beyond specific applications to include student-teachers development in the final section of the book. The issues raised at the end of each section are also interesting and open up spaces for reflection on key issues. Notwithstanding this, the scope of the book in terms of the technological applications covered inevitably reflects the state of the field in 2005 prior to its publication. In a fast-moving field such as language learning and technology, the book might feel outdated to experienced practitioners in the application of technology in their teaching. Although the book covers a wide range of technological applications, blogs and bulletin boards are portrayed in some chapters as the next or future avenues for exploration.

In Chapter 1 the expectation of a strong research-informed focus is raised, and this expectation is met with varying success by different authors. In particular, Graham Stanley in Chapter 14 addresses research beyond foreign language learning. For the most part, however, the theoretical rationale for the use of technologies does not meet the expectations set at the start. All chapters revisit well-established foreign language learning constructs (input, interaction, autonomy, authenticity). When dealing with the crucial question of providing the rationale for the use of a particular application, most chapters focus on motivation, authenticity, or improved communication and draw only modestly from published research in the field of learning and technology. A pedagogical rationale based on motivation and improved communication could be criticised as insufficient. A rationale based on more aspects of student learning would be much stronger.

The book is well structured but some of the content feels repetitive. The reader wonders at some point about the relationship between section headings and content of some chapters. For example, in the first section of the book the titles suggest a specific focus on a language skill (reading, writing, speaking or listening). However, some of these chapters in the first section reflect much more than one particular skill (speaking or listening, for example) and deal with a greater range of skills in the development of full courses. This aspect of course and module development becomes repetitive as it is encountered in other sections of the book. In addition, either implicitly or explicitly, a number of chapters throughout the book deal with engaging with authentic audiences and for authentic purposes and hence, some of the elements of the third section are not strictly exclusive to the section but have been dealt with elsewhere in the book.

As stated at the start of the review, practitioners will benefit from sections on challenges and future directions, in which authors provide realistic accounts of their experiences. The issues raised for reflection are informative and no less important today than they were in 2006.

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## **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

Carmen Tomás received her PhD from the University of Nottingham and focuses her research on foreign language reading and the uses of ICT in educational settings. She received a postdoctoral fellowship at the Learning Sciences Research Institute at the University of Nottingham. She currently works in

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