Since the 1980s, many universities have been engaged in one way or another in the use of computer technology in teaching, including foreign language teaching. It was also in the 1980s that computer-assisted language learning (CALL) emerged as a discipline with the publication of the CALICO Journal in 1983 and ReCALL soon after in 1989. Since the 1990s when the World Wide Web came into its own, many universities have implemented Web-based teaching materials in support of language learning, a process that has culminated in blended language courses (Chenoweth, Ushida, & Murday, 2006) and a few completely online courses (Blake & Delforge, 2005). The encouragement for using Web-based teaching has sometimes been imposed by university administrations in the hope that the use of technology would enable institutions to retain their competitive edge with other institutions for the purpose of recruiting students or in the belief that the use of technology would somehow reduce educational costs by having more students taught per faculty member. In some cases, the result was the creation of hastily developed Web pages containing supplementary instruction—essentially re-presenting classroom activities—or exercises—essentially replicating workbook activities—that offer relatively little added value to second language teaching. While excitement ran high as developers created Web page after Web page, few general principles were available to guide the design of these pages other than those governing technical requirements for Web page creation.

As the field of CALL began to mature and as interest in computer-based distance education continued to grow at the turn of the 21st century, researchers and practitioners began to seriously investigate the features of computer technology as a way to operationalize second language acquisition precepts and also to capitalize on its strengths in distance language learning. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) quickly came to the fore as a means to enhance negotiation of meaning and focus on form as learners communicated with native speakers in CMC sessions. Studies also began to appear which showed that blended learning and completely online learning yielded results in student achievement comparable to those in face-to-face learning settings. Most of these results concerned discrete aspects of language learning, for example, individual grammatical structures and specific parts of individual courses (e.g., Collentine, 2000). Other publications examined distance language learning in more general terms, providing stronger theoretical bases for the sociocultural elements prevalent in its use and preliminary delineations of best practices for online learning (e.g., see Felix, 2003; Belz & Thorne, 2006; Goertler & Winke, 2008; Lomicka & Lord, 2009).

What has been lacking up to this point is an overall didactic framework for distance language learning. The current volume goes a long way in addressing this need. Jean-Claude Bertin, Patrick Gravé, and Jean-Paul Narcy-Combes propose a conceptual framework for distance language learning and construct
a model of online language learning environments. Their model displays various components (e.g., teacher, learner, language, context, etc.) and, more important, how these components are interrelated. The various components and their interrelationships are schematically presented in a figure in Chapter 1 and then discussed in considerable detail in the following chapters. Of primary importance for the authors are the complex ways in which events that can occur in any given component can potentially affect actions in all the other components. Thus, for example, a task assigned by the teacher can lead learners to search for necessary informational resources, seek language learning help, interact with other learners, request guidance from the teacher or tutor, and present a final report, almost all of which is mediated by the computer. The authors call their model a “didactic ergonomics” model because it portrays a very general view of the teaching/learning situation and focuses on the parameters of the online learning space designed to facilitate students’ language learning efforts.

At its most general level, the model the authors propose is a conceptual framework for online learning that they ground in theories and research findings from a variety of disciplines. As such, it offers a broad pedagogical perspective in which to view distance language learning in much the same way that Colpaert (2004) offers a broad engineering perspective in which to view interactive language learning courseware. While Colpaert concentrates on software development, Bertin, Gravé, and Narcy-Combes concentrate on the interactions of learners with course content, real-world information, language resources, teacher, tutor, and so on, independent of any software or hardware used to support those interactions.

At its most concrete level, the model highlights the factors that underlie the creation, administration, and evaluation of task-based language teaching in online courses. In the context of task-based language teaching, the authors underscore the importance of the cyclic application of micro- and macro tasks that leads ultimately to students’ completion of major course objectives, typically in the form of a presentation of a work product directly corresponding to professional contexts in the real world. In order to accomplish tasks, students must be not only active participants in the learning process but also direct their own learning—with assistance from others as necessary—and must accept what the authors call “epistemological responsibility” for the organization of their learning. Although, in this writer’s opinion, true learner autonomy remains an unresolved question in distance education, the authors demonstrate how distance education puts learners’ epistemological responsibility into relief. In fact, the authors show that the characteristics endemic to distance education (e.g., time, place, and social distance) bring into explicit focus the elements of language teaching that are often taken for granted in the classroom; as they state, distance education “creates the need to constantly raise awareness of traditionally implicit processes and strategies.”

All in all, the current volume sheds light on the fundamental processes involved in distance language learning. The authors support their analysis of distance language learning environments with theoretical constructs from several disciplinary perspectives. The didactic ergonomics model that emerges from their analysis reveals the complexity that can arise from the interaction of the components of their model. Although the complexity of these interactions may seem daunting at first glance, it is an issue that researchers, practitioners, and course developers in CALL need to take into account in order to understand—and to create—pedagogically effective online language learning environments.

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REFERENCES


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