Foreword

E-LEARNING (RESEARCH) AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES: AN INTRODUCTION

In this opening piece, I attempt to offer an introduction to the *Handbook of Research on E-Learning Methodologies for Language Acquisition*, edited by Rita de Cassia Veiga Marriott and Patricia Lupion Torres, from the perspective of a nonparticipant observer. I am very grateful for the invitation by the editors to share my comments on their ambitious project in this way, and I will do so not only on the basis of a careful reflection on the chapters featured in this book but also against the background of my own personal professional engagement as a teacher and researcher over many years, the latter in a leading specialist higher education institution, inter alia with the fields of foreign language (FL) teaching, learning, and research, as well as FL teacher education and development with particular reference to digital technologies and their application for (FL) teaching and learning. In so doing, my main points of reference will be the chapters of this handbook and their individual and collective contribution to the field. Partly due to lack of space and partly because the historical overviews and literature reviews featured by individual chapters already offer an engagement with at least some of the key literature in the field, I will refrain from providing my own topography here. This allows me to concentrate on the following observations:

FL teaching and learning can be considered particularly suited to the use of technologies, new and old, with the focus in this introductory piece firmly on the former. Among other things, the skills and processes involved in FL teaching and learning align well with the characteristics and potential of digital technologies, be it in relation to traditional uses such as drill-practice (e.g., to enhance memorization of new lexical items); the systematic capturing and analysis of linguistic data, both at semantic and syntactic levels; or skill-based work around modeling to improve pronunciation, be it practicing listening through digital artefacts or speaking through the production of digital audio, practicing reading by accessing authentic material on the Internet, or developing writing through computer-mediated synchronous or asynchronous communication tools, to name but a few. The possibilities for the application of new technologies in FL teaching and learning are extensive; the list of examples given here is only indicative but it should suffice to support the previous assertion.

In fact, I want to go further than just assert a particularly good fit between the characteristics and potential of new technologies, such as their communicative emphasis, multimodality, distributed nature, interactivity, and so forth, and FL teaching and learning here (for a detailed discussion, see Allford and Pachler [2007]) and instead posit that in view of the increasing proliferation, if not to say ubiquity and functional convergence of technological devices, FL learners as well as their educators can ill afford not to engage proactively with new technologies in the twin processes of FL learning and teaching. While this is not to argue that new technologies have reached the state of normalization, Bax (2003) argues in his oft-cited piece on the past, present, and future of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)
(i.e., that the technology has become invisible and truly integrated). While invisibility, or rather ubiquity, appears to be increasingly the case in the life-worlds of many learners, particularly of young and teenage learners in the so-called developed countries (Bachmair, 2007), these technologies have far from infiltrated the personal and professional life-worlds of their teachers. I focus on the term ubiquity rather than invisibility since although devices are becoming increasingly portable and wireless networks increasingly allow for anytime and anywhere connectivity, they remain physical entities with potentially disruptive influence on the ecology of formal learning situations. Wireless connectivity cannot readily be equated with true integration (Bax, 2003). Another, in my view, very important dimension that Bax’s notion of normalization ignores or, at best, does not explicitly engage with, is the ideological baggage embedded in technology. While the notion of ubiquity runs the risk of the ideological undergirding remaining undetected, the notion of normalization bestows upon it mainstream status without really examining it critically. In Kress and Pachler (2007), drawing on Bruce and Hogan (1998), we argue that all technological tools embody certain social and cultural values, and we note that it is important to understand how technologies are designed, interpreted, used, constructed, reconstructed, and so forth.

Although this current piece is by no means an attempt to deconstruct Bax’s (2003) very helpful critical reassessment of Warschauer’s history of CALL, another important notion that warrants discussion here is what Graham (1997) calls “dynamic obsolescence,” (i.e., the problem of hardware and software constantly evolving and becoming out of date). This fact works fundamentally against normalization. The current—and future—trend is firmly toward mobile, visual, and social technologies (cf. Web 2.0) (for a detailed discussion of these technologies, see Kress and Pachler [2007] and Owen, Grant, Sayers, and Facer [2006]). Suffice it to note that these trends arguably require new explanatory frames for the processes, context, and practices of (FL) learning and are associated with an entirely new set of technologies. For a discussion of these technologies in the context of FL teaching and teacher education, see Pachler, Barnes, and Field (2008).

The pace of change is relentless, and it is inevitably difficult to do it full justice in a medium-term project such as this handbook that took two years from conception to completion. It is very pleasing to see, therefore, that some of the contributions (e.g., the chapters on Second Life, podcasting, handhelds, and social software) engage with new technologies, tools, and applications explicitly. My assertion is simply that there is a huge new research agenda emerging and that the challenge for researchers as well as learners and teachers continues, despite the publication of this very helpful and commendable volume. Although the current volume offers a very useful and impressive array of studies, in view of the preceding, it can at best be viewed as work in progress, and there remains an urgent need for more research in this constantly evolving field.

In developing this new research agenda, one could do much worse than reflect on the efforts to date of various academics such as Bax (2003) to analyze the developmental trajectory of the use of new technologies in FL teaching and learning. Kern (2006), for example, asks the very pertinent question whether CALL should still be called CALL. In my view, the term is in need of a reappraisal, and I concur with Kern, who, with reference to Egbert (2005) and Warschauer (1999), argues that with the proliferation of tools, the focus on computers is no longer appropriate and the term CALL suggests a dislocation of technology from the normalcy of learners’ and teachers’ engagements with FLs and as “outside the ecology of language use.” The question arises, therefore, what should be used in its stead. The term e-learning appears to be used by contributors to this volume in the same generic sense as the UK government in its 2005 e-strategy (DfES, 2005). Another widely used term, at least in the UK context, is Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). My personal preference is for a more generic term such as “digital technologies,” as this allows for a wider range of use apart from information retrieval, processing, production, and communication. It seems to me to foreground that which is substantively different from older technologies (i.e., the digital format of the content and the possibilities that affords).
What, then, of the importance of the contribution of this handbook collectively to the debate around the use of digital technologies in FL teaching and learning? In order to be able to answer this question, a closer look at the individual contributions is required. One thing is clear and can be stated with some confidence: the handbook brings together an impressive range of topics and types of technology from a wide range of contributors based on a rich diversity of contexts, languages, learners, and ages. This affords the reader an opportunity to familiarize himself or herself with a wide range of interesting examples.

As it is not possible to provide a detailed discussion of all the contributions to this volume given the sheer number of contributions as well as the limited space available for an introduction, I shall confine myself to glossing and commenting briefly, in no particular order, on a few papers with particular emphasis on the newer technologies.

Ria Hanewald discusses the potential of digital learning objects; in particular, by examining the tension of neutrality vs. certain value orientations. She argues in particular that while free digital learning objects in digital repositories are important to prevent the marginalization of language education online, attention to the cultural situatedness and pedagogical framing of FL learning and teaching are important, and therefore, particular attention needs to be paid to the conceptualization, standardization, and application of learning objects and repositories. Very useful about her piece is the introduction it offers to a range of selected online repositories, even if it is left to the reader to apply the useful criteria for evaluating them presented in the latter part of the piece.

Chaka Chaka coins the acronyms MALL (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning) and PALL (Pen-Assisted Language Learning) as replacements for CALL. The chapter offers an attempt of a multidimensional definition of m-learning and envisions a future in which various portable and ubiquitous computing devices with new types of functionality leading to portable and pervasive, personalized, context-aware, just-in-time flexible language learning.

Euline Cutrim Schmid discussed the use of interactive whiteboards (IWBs); in particular, what techniques in their use are available and how these facilitate the integration of multimedia into the curriculum, cater to diverse learning needs, enhance motivation, enhance interaction and collaboration with teachers having to guard against an emphasis on teacher-centered approaches, and an undue acceleration of pace.

Betty Rose Facer and M’hammed Abdous examine the impact of podcasting in relation to the reinforcement of content through provision of self-paced access to authentic material and the improvement of pronunciation and vocabulary as well as oral and aural skills. They describe the application of podcasting very much in the context of an alternative way of curriculum delivery, although they acknowledge that podcasts present a real opportunity for knowledge creation and dissemination by students.

Sarah Guth problematizes the relationship between emergent social software as an extension to network-based approaches and FL learning, and stresses access to sites of real and authentic language production and uses they afford. She posits that the focus is on activities rather than applications that focus on the creation, sharing, and managing of knowledge.

Alexandra Okada emphasizes the potential of open source educational resources and attendant knowledge mapping techniques for FL learning, such as concept, mind, argument, and Web mapping. For a detailed discussion of these techniques, see the Special Issue of Reflecting Education (http://reflectingeducation.net) on the topic published in 2007. The chapter outlines some open learning communities and their features, such as open products, integrity, transparency, nondiscrimination, and noninterference. As with a number of other areas in this volume, it will be interesting to see some of the concepts and notions critically discussed in future papers.

Mar Gutiérrez-Colon Plana discusses the use of VLEs in FL learning from a student perspective; in particular, the frustrations at times experienced by learners, and with reference to relevant background
literature, she identifies good and bad practices. The discussion tends to focus on the potential technical and general stumbling blocks; a consideration of these factors may invite the reader to consider how best to teach aspects of listening comprehension online.

Margaret Murphy and Cristina Poyatos Matas focus on the issue of politeness in intercultural e-mail communication, and they present, on the basis of their research with Australian and Korean subjects, an instrument to assess politeness and consider the pedagogical application of their instrument. The authors note the limitations of their instrument in terms of subjectivity and potential cultural bias.

Interaction-based research in the context of online communities is, indeed, one of the main foci of the volume. In view of the prominence of this theme in the literature, this is not surprising. Adail Sebastiao, Rodrigues Jr., and Vera Paiva offer a conceptually interesting piece in which they use the notion of footing; in particular, social, teaching, and cognitive as a frame for trying to understand and explain online interaction. They argue that in view of the lack of prosodic segmentation and paralinguistic resources bound up in talk-in-context, there is a need for interlocutors to make their footing visible and explicit online. They interpret footing as the indexing of utterances to facilitate knowledge construction. They also relate their discussion to Halliday’s (2004) transitory model.

Arif Altun and Sedat Akayoglu in turn investigate the functions of negotiation of meaning across native and non-native speakers using computer-mediated discourse analysis in an attempt to provide a taxonomy for text-based synchronous CMC environments. Junia de Carvalho Fidelis Braga and Antonio Martins use Garrison and Anderson’s (2003) inquiry framework to explore the role of social presence in blended and online learning environments.

Jing Wang examines the use of hyperlinked dictionaries in developing reading of authentic material for learners of Chinese. The study notes the variability of findings across proficiency levels, which is linked to the nature of characters and words in Chinese. With reference to Hubbard (2000), they use the term meaning technologies in relation to hyperlinked dictionaries.

Last, but by no means least, for current purposes, Christine Rosalia and Lorena Llosa offer a very useful discussion of peer feedback in online writing. In particular, they describe an instrument developed to assess the quality of peer feedback.

In order to enable the reader to make better sense of the diversity offered across theories, practices, methodologies, and contexts, the handbook would have benefited from a more substantial editorial offering an explicit frame of reference against which to read the various contributions. The handbook offers a collection of more or less systematic and inquiry-based reflections on pedagogical and didactic practices, which are, to a greater or lesser degree, aligned to certain theoretical conceptualizations drawn from (a combination of) constructivist, social interactionist, as well as (inter)cultural and/or semiotic approaches (Pachler, 2005). An extended foreword would have supported the reader in the process of meaning-making and categorization in this respect.

This diversity of perspectives, in my view, is not necessarily a bad thing, and with Egbert (2005), who made the point in the context of research into technology-enhanced FL teaching and learning, I would argue the need for plurality in theoretical and methodological, pedagogical, and didactic perspectives. However, it is somewhat surprising that those few generic explanatory frames for technology-enhanced and online learning and teaching that do exist, the most prominent being Garrison and Anderson’s (2003) framework for research and practice and Laurillard’s (2002, 2007) conversational model, are conspicuous by their absence in all but very few of the contributions to this handbook, as is, by and large, reference to the fora in which they tend to be debated, such as the Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks (JALN) (http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/jaln/) and the International Review of Research in Open and Distance Education (IRODL) (http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl). My contention here is that reference to and critical engagement with the world of educational research and practice more generally
can only benefit the advancement of our understanding of FL-specific practices and processes and is a challenge to be taken up by future volumes.

Let me finish my critical commendation of this volume by reminding us all that what matters is not technology itself, but rather how it is used. As others have rightly observed before me (Kern, 2006, 2000), technology-enhanced FL teaching is not a methodological approach in itself but must be seen as embedded in particular teaching methods and conceptualization of FL learning processes. Any research into the use of technology for FL teaching and learning must, therefore, take cognizance of these teaching methods and assumptions about how language learning takes place and treat them as important variables. It is, therefore, hoped that this volume will provide inspiration for further research into this important field of study.

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REFERENCES


