GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

Special Issue on Papers from AILA 2014

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Since its foundation in 1964, AILA as an international federation of national and regional associations of Applied Linguistics has grown to become a key network within the field. It currently represents more than 8,000 applied linguists from around the world. Applied Linguistics as an interdisciplinary field of research and practice deals with any practical and everyday issues concerned with language, its use, its social and communicative practices and representations as well as language teaching and learning. AILA and its affiliates regard applied linguistics as a multidisciplinary and diverse field of research and practice within global as well as regional and local contexts. Therefore, promoting the exchange of scientific knowledge and practical experience embedded in international cooperation and networking is one of the main objectives of the association. This is also seen as key to fostering and maintaining linguistic diversity and language pluralism, which is why AILA proactively supports applied linguistics in developing countries and reaches out to colleagues from less privileged regions via its solidarity initiatives.

Apart from the dissemination of scientific information by a variety of publications, including a scholarly journal, a book series and a newsletter, AILA also establishes and supports Research Networks (ReNs) and holds a major triennial world congress, which usually attracts about 2,000 colleagues from around the world. Such world congresses, regarded as one of the key events on the calendar of any researcher, policy maker or practitioner concerned with language, usually generate a number of additional initiatives towards publishing samples of best research and practice as presented and reflected in the various symposia, paper presentations and other sessions of the congress. The AILA 2014 Applied Linguistics World Congress was held in Brisbane (Australia) in August of that year, and – as per usual – led to very intense and fruitful deliberations of high standard on current key topics in any of its diverse fields of research and practice. Among these, the use of digital tools in language learning and in support of applied linguistics research was a major issue. As AILA constantly attempts to share its membership's expertise beyond events such as its world congresses, it is only natural that the publication on hand was initiated.

This volume contains a collection of five research papers that investigate a range of language learning issues through the use of technology.

In the first research paper, Sumie Akutsu from Toyo University and Tim Marchand from Gakushuin University in Japan describe how they utilized Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) not only for delivering their news-based English course to Japanese students in three different universities in the Tokyo area but also how they used the data from the students' blog contributions on the CMC course to design remedial teaching materials to address specific student needs. The researchers compiled the Japanese student output into a corpus and compared it to a similar news-based native speaker corpus in terms of language use. Error analysis was also used to extract common language errors in the students' postings. The results of these analyses highlighted specific differences between the native speakers and the Japanese students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in how they used language to express opinions and views. The researchers were able to explain these differences in terms of mother-tongue transfer and the cultural background of the students. Based on the results, they were able to design remedial teaching materials to help address the specific language needs of the students and help them improve their performance on the CMC course.

The second article describes a CMC project aimed at the development of intercultural communicative competence in second language learners. Linda van der Kroon, Kristi Jauregi and Jan ten Thije from Utrecht University in the Netherlands involved 19 students from two schools, one in Spain and one in the Netherlands, in two telecollaboration sessions based on two different intercultural exchange tasks. The researchers analysed the recordings of the student exchanges in terms of the use of meta-communicative devices (MCDs) used by the students. Results showed that the technologically mediated pedagogical tasks have indeed brought pupils' intercultural consciousness to a higher level, while the different communication modes and tasks implicitly elicited the use of MCDs to guarantee understanding. Based on these results the study outlines a model of communication strategies for the development of intercultural understanding through the use of CMC.

The next research paper by Wan-Tsai Kung from Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Taiwan and Zohreh Eslami from Texas A&M University investigated EFL students' incidental focus on form by analyzing language related episodes (LREs) in synchronous online communication using MSN Instant Messenger between native and non-native speakers of English from low and high proficiency levels. Students' incidental language acquisition was measured through an immediate and a delayed post-test. While the interactions between native and non-native speakers did not show any differences in terms of LREs used by each proficiency group, the interactions between non-native speakers showed that learners of lower language proficiency demonstrated significantly more instances of focus on form (LREs) than did the higher proficiency students. Comparisons within each proficiency group also showed that students generated more LREs when they interacted with the native than with the non-native speakers. The post-tests showed that learners, regardless of their language proficiency level and whether they interacted with a native or a non-native speaker, focused on form during the task-based online interactions and could retain a significant amount of the targeted forms in the LREs. The results of the study demonstrate that EFL teachers need to provide second language learners with more opportunities to attend to linguistic forms during meaning focused interactions using CMC and task-based learning activities.

In the fourth paper in this volume, Ken Reeder, Jon Shapiro, Jane Wakefield and Reg D'Silva from the University of British Columbia in Canada investigated the extent to which a speech recognition software (The Reading Tutor) contributed to the reading development of young learners of English as an additional language. Two groups (control and treatment) participated in two

3.5-month treatments that utilized a cross-over design. Students' reading skills were measured at the start and at the end of each 3.5-month period using the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency measure. While the results of the study showed a small effect for the use of The Reading Tutor on students' reading development when compared to high quality EAL pullout support, they do demonstrate that RT helps students notice their errors and it is clearly associated with strong gains in oral reading fluency and with significant grade level gains in young learners of English.

In the final paper of this volume Adrian Leis from Miyagi University of Education, Akihiko Tohei from Sakura-no Seibo Junior College, and Simon Cooke from Tohoku Institute of Technology, investigated the effects of using smartphones for teaching English to Japanese students. During a 15-week course with a control and a treatment group, the use of smartphones (treatment group) was contrasted with traditional language teaching (control group). Students in the treatment group were able to use apps that allowed them to review video-recordings of their role-play practice, get immediate feedback on their pronunciation, and receive reports on their test performance within minutes from taking a test. The results of the study showed that students in the treatment group studied more outside of the classroom, they used more metacognitive skills and exhibited a higher level of intrinsic motivation, and they were also more autonomous than students in the control group who were prohibited from using their smartphones in class. Based on these results, the researchers advocate for the integration of smart-phones in the EFL classroom in order to enhance students' language learning experience.

All the papers in this issue are indicative of the fact that applied linguistics and the international AILA community are proactively reacting to the constantly changing world of digital communication and digitally enhanced opportunities for learning and communication. Integrating smart devices into classroom practice or providing learners with CMC-supported learning opportunities is becoming more and more common in educational contexts, and applied linguists need to address the kinds of challenges discussed here. The same is true for the use of new collaborative tools and modes of communication as well as the new kinds of texts or samples of communicative practice generated by such applications, including more recent developments such as speech recognition software. Intercultural competences, often referred to as the key aim of language learning, is a further aspect impacted by digital modes of telecollaboration. Consequently, it is only natural that one of the papers presented at the AILA 2014 World Congress concerned with this was selected for this volume. Therefore, the editors hope that the volume on hand will further stimulate the discourse on all matters concerned with digital tools amongst applied linguists worldwide.

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