Book Review

Handbook of Research on Foreign Language Education in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, the roles of language teachers and learners need to be redefined in an online-oriented learning environment. Focusing on language education, the book examines the current trends in digital technology and diversity and provides a variety of cases around the world to show different dimensions about the latest research in foreign language education. Edited by Congcong Wang and Lisa Winstead, the book is co-authored by 32 international contributors. The front matter includes “Table of Contents,” a well-put preface, and a “Detailed Table of Contents” where 17 chapters are summarized with abstracts that are helpful to professionals, researchers, curriculum designers interested in seeking a specific channel of language-education related technology instruction. More considerately, as to the chapter part, each chapter ends with a half-page “Key Terms and Definitions” section, which is very applicable to those who would like to know more about linguistics, language acquisition, and technology-assisted pedagogy.

In the digital age, the roles of language teachers and learners need to be reassessed in an online-oriented learning environment (Reitbauer & Fromm, 2016). Focusing on language education, the book examines the current trends in digital educational technology, the role of diversity supportive practices, and provides cases from around the world illustrating different dimensions of the latest research in foreign language education.

While there is the rare example of an introduction to an academic text appearing in some extended or outright lengthy form, this book begins with a 46-page introduction with a 12-page list of references that is a standout exception for lengthy introductions and a strong precursor to the level of detail and analysis presented in the body of its text. Besides proclaiming the urgent importance of taking closer look at language education under the influence of technology the authors provide a brief historical review of how technology-assisted-language-learning (TALL) has affected language learning over the course of decades. Moreover, many crucial aspects of these impacts are mentioned in the introduction, including the uneven development and transferability issues among TALL pedagogy, inequitable access to technology made by socioeconomic divides, and a debate as to whether technology is a facilitator or a threat to humans. Unlike much of the literature praising technology innovation, the authors ended their introduction with a reminder that while we are gaining new advantages in the digital age, we are also losing our humanity due to the high levels of digital colonization around the world.

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The book consists of 17 chapters grouped into five sections with only one chapter in the first section. Given the long introduction addressing many important issues, it is not surprising to see Chapter 1 restate the importance of how language communities around the world should take responsibility in respecting and protecting the teaching of endangered languages. As the president of the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Language, the author appeals for cross-collaborations among world language educators for support.

The other 16 chapters are grouped together in the remaining four sections. Section Two, “Technologies across Continents”, comprises five chapters. Chapter 2 examines a case-study research about language massive open online courses (LMOOCs) on the East Coast of the U.S. The exploratory study draws on data from 15 ESL/EFL student teachers and it suggests that MOOCs type of courses rely heavily on learner’s self-motivation. Chapter 3 is a socio-pragmatic study of student interpretations of French native speakers’ Tweets. It explores why and how micro-blogs such as Twitter are utilized in French language learning. With a method of learner analysis, the authors examined how learners applied “hashtag” conversations to enhance second language literacy and online communication. Chapter 4 explores the uneven education-technology development in Brazil. The authors state that even though the Brazilian government simultaneously recognizes the importance of promoting the learning of the official language Portuguese and the international language English, the socio-economic imbalance still caused the country to face the challenges of educational reform. The author of Chapter 5 analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of both flipped- and hybrid-learning in a Spanish classroom. While she was providing recommendations for general pedagogical applications of these two models, such as the flexibility accommodating a diverse student population with different learning styles and paces (Poon, 2013), she also pointed out learners who are not highly-motivated would often face some challenges derived from the two models’ implementations. Chapter 6 is about how to utilize multiple digital modes and assessments to design an online Chinese course. It probably would interest those who particularly teach non-alphabetical language courses because the instructors often encounter a similar problem mentioned in this chapter: how to teach ideographical symbols and in the mean time develop ways of helping foreign-language learners engage with multimedia materials. The synchronous and asynchronous course-design steps are the most valuable description in this chapter.

Section Three “Web Collaboration across Languages” comprises four chapters echoing what Godwin-Jones (2019) argues: that due to the rise of informal language learning promoted by mobile devices, digital-natives’ daily experiences are becoming a central point for their learning. The entire section is about how web-based informal language learning has become increasingly popular worldwide. Chapter 7 describes a micro-immersion course-design via Skype to connect native English speakers in the US to native Spanish speakers in Nicaragua for virtual target language-exchange practice. Chapter 8 explains how a blended learning environment aided with information and communication technologies may better implement English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in a college EFL classroom during a two-month experiment. For example, the instructor designed a wiki-type of inquiry-based learning to promote virtual collaboration among students. Chapter 9 further states the advantage of online collaboration in an online translanguaging setting. The author addresses how learners’ prior language knowledge combined with semiotic sources may promote second language acquisition among Romance languages. Taking another viewpoint, Chapter 10 reveals how online collaboration can benefit tandem language learning. Here the course experiment is a blog-writing project involving one program for French language learners in China and a corresponding program for Chinese language learners in France. Due to the fundamental difference between the ideogram language Chinese and the phonogram language French, the authors highlight several of the challenges of this language-exchange project such as teaching Chinese characters and French grammar and developing ways of engaging students with multimedia materials.

Section Four, “Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL)”, comprises three chapters. Chapter 11 brings up an historical review of the Yiddish language, and describes how Yiddish has been
revived due to the emergence of social media. The author further explains that online interactions occurring in social media can improve language revitalization on campuses. Some Yiddish-based digital platforms are also introduced to promote the author’s idea. Chapter 12 continues with the internet merits for creating ubiquitous interactions and a cross-cultural communication environment, and this time the LCTL example is Korean. The author attributes the language-learning trend to the “K-wave” of Korean pop cultural products accepted by the young generations worldwide. Later the author highlights how a group of American students improved their language competence and cultural messages by regularly applying videoconferencing with Korean native speakers from South Korea. The LCTL example introduced in Chapter 13 is Arabic. Titled “Globalization and Possibilities for Intercultural Awareness: Multimodal Arabic Culture Portfolios at a Catholic University”, the title wording encourages readers to further read the text. The Catholic university is located in one of the most diverse cities in the state of Illinois, USA. Despite the Catholic faith and tradition on the campus, the Arabic program has been offered as one of the critical less commonly taught languages on campus for at least 15 years. The author collected the data from surveys and the multi-modal culture portfolios co-developed by the author and the enrolled students, and the purpose is to find out how much the students learned before and after they enrolled in the Arabic course. The study also reviewed some challenges the students faced in accessing cultural resources related to the Arab world.

Section Five “Teacher Education and Learning Strategies” comprises four chapters. The first two chapters explore the issues of teacher education. Chapter 14 describes a qualitative study conducted with pre-service elementary school student teachers enrolled in a graduate program of a teacher-education institute in France. The study aimed to evaluate whether the use of multimedia throughout the course could promote a greater sense of empathy toward culturally and linguistically diverse students. The data analysis reveals that the use of video did help the participants understand the concepts related to second language acquisition but the authors question whether the use of multimedia really fostered a sense of empathy in students. Chapter 15 shows that not all of the course experiments applying multimedia will always be successful. The experiment described in the chapter looks into the complexity of user attitude, web-technology, and language pedagogy interwoven in the process of adopting mobile assisted language learning (MALL). The survey samples are 240 users from four colleges in Guangdong Province, China, and 28 teachers were interviewed afterwards. While the survey data indicated the EFL teachers had a positive attitude toward MALL, the interviews indicated that most of them did not have positive impression toward the application of MALL in the classroom. Possible reasons interpreted by the author are that the teachers had concerns about the change in perception of their traditional teacher roles, which in practice means the EFL teachers need to be involved in the long process of guiding the students to use the apps. The experiment was about how teachers and students in China used apps for smart phones to support their informal English-as-a-foreign-language learning, and it showed that learning process is a complex dynamic system involving external guidance (Murray & Lamb, 2018). Chapter 16 and 17 explore the issues associated with learning strategies. The author of Chapter 16, who is also the co-editor of this book, reports a course case-study about how a group of Mexican heritage English language learners successfully interacted with native English speakers. The method of transcription analysis was used to evaluate 12 English-and-Spanish videotaped sessions. The result suggests that tandem language learning strategies can promote the learning of the two languages simultaneously, and the learners from both sides also got a chance to develop their metacognition; which help them confront language barriers with a more effective mindset. Chapter 17 is about a quantitative study focusing on a similar interest in tandem language learning. The study shows that after applying the assigned strategy of blog peer feedback for three months and comparing the results with the 30-participant group taught through the conventional face-to-face method, there is a statistically significant improvement of the writing skills of the test group of 30 Iranian EFL learners. The authors also conclude that the strategy would be advisable to encourage learners to maintain online interactions via weblogs, which is helpful in making learners realize the communicative aspects of EFL writing.
Gathering worldwide technology-aided research information is a strong suit of this book. Readers may observe how different social, cultural, age, or economical backgrounds can result in assorted outcomes (Oxford, 2017). Edited by two scholars, the book is co-authored by 32 international contributors. The front matter includes “Table of Contents”, an engagingly well written preface, and a “Detailed Table of Contents” where 17 chapters are summarized with abstracts that are helpful to professionals, researchers, and curriculum designers interested in seeking a specific channel of language-education related technology instruction. More considerately, each chapter ends with a half-page of “Key Terms and Definitions”, which is very applicable to those who would like to know more about linguistics, language acquisition, and technology-assisted pedagogy.

Digital/online educational technology has been developing for at least the last 20 years, and this book discusses different settings and learners in an international context to reflect that and the relationship between tools and users is “more complex and more promising” (Reinders & White, 2016, P. 143). However, in regard to the language-education field, how far can technology-aided learning go? How much “aided” can be called “aided” and not be called “replaced”? Obviously these will be ongoing arguments. Presumably this phenomenon indicates opportunities and challenges just like what we saw in the book. Through reviewing different experiments, projects, and course designs described in the book, educators have the opportunity to gain new insight and new inspiration on their education and teaching journeys.
REFERENCES


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