Book Review


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In the age of technology, teachers and researchers are seeking implementation of effective and user-friendly technologies in a foreign language (FL) classroom. Following this trend, Blake’s book (2nd Ed.) uses eight chapters to explore how technology can be leveraged to FL learning and teaching and emphasize the importance of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) with empirical evidence.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the interface between technology and second language acquisition (SLA). Blake first accentuates the role of technology in transforming traditional classrooms into interactive learning environments (Chenoweth & Tucker 2006). Then, he teases out common misconceptions about technology in SLA and calls for a careful evaluation and constant installation of technology in FL instruction. Finally, he surveys SLA theories that are fundamental to the application of technology in FL education, such as Krashen’s comprehensible input, Gass and Doughty’s social interaction approach, and Long and Robinson’s task-based learning, which provide theoretical basis for the discussions in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 introduces different types of web-based technologies and their application to the development of web-based learning materials. Meanwhile, he calls to our attention that the proper application of technology is determined by teaching approach, learning objectives, curriculum, and learner characteristics. Therefore, he suggests that web pages should be embedded into a content-based instruction classroom curriculum aiming at language and cultural immersion.

Chapter 3 focuses on tutorial CALL, a learning program in which the computer controls learning by providing feedback and evaluating outcomes. Blake compares a number of CALL developing tools, including web-based authoring tools such as Interactive Language Learning Authoring Package and Hot Potatoes, intelligent CALL (iCALL) such as E-Tutor for German and Robo-Sensei for Japanese, and automatic speech recognition tools such as Tell Me More Pro. In addition, he discusses the evaluation of CALL programs and suggests that CALL programs should be evaluated separately due to differences in embedded technologies.

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1 For book review proposals, please contact the book review editor Han Luo at luoh@lafayette.edu.
Chapter 4 examines computer-mediated communication (CMC), which can be categorized into asynchronous (ACMC) and synchronous (SCMC). AMC tools provide prolonged responses such as e-mail, discussion forum, blog, and wiki whereas SCMC tools provide instant interactive responses such as instant messaging (e.g., Yahoo! Messenger) and videoconferencing programs (e.g., Skype). Both AMC and SCMC have been shown to improve intercultural communication competence and second language (L2) proficiency. Therefore, Blake argues for the indispensable role of language instructors in using CMC in FL classes and denies any suggestions on the absence of instructor.

Chapter 5 summarizes the previous four chapters and looks into the application of technologies from five perspectives: a) the multimodal approach that advocates using multiple technologies; b) theory-driven applications of new technologies; c) student-centered classrooms; d) technology-enhanced classroom interactions; and e) digital spaces for bilingual and intercultural development. Blake emphasizes that the constellation of technologies should be grounded in a clear theoretical framework yet flexible enough to be calibrated for ongoing student needs.

Chapter 6 takes up distance learning (DL) for languages. DL refers to the application of various technological platforms for online courses, such as teleconference, hybrid, blended, and virtual courses. This chapter critically reviews different types of DL and argues that a DL course could be slightly more effective than or at least not less effective than a traditional course. Drawing on findings of previous studies, Blake holds that the real challenge of DL lies in how to incorporate it into a well-engineered pedagogical framework.

Chapter 7 investigates the application of social networking service (SNS) to L2 learning. Blake moves from the role of SNS in life to the possibility of using SNS in class. It is argued that SNS, in general, enables learners to reach target language speakers across cultures and thus gives rise to autonomous learning in L2 development. As a platform of sharing and presenting information in groups, SNS such as Facebook could be implemented for self-paced and collaborative learning.

Chapter 8 addresses the interface between gaming and language learning. Blake discusses the importance of gaming in language learning and learning principles (Gee, 2007) that could guide game design and suggests a systematic evidence-based approach to implement games in language learning. Finally, he introduces Mentria, a place-based mobile phone application designed for L2 Spanish curriculum, showing how mobile applications can prompt learner agency in FL practices.

This book is a timely addition to the growing interest in technology-enhanced FL learning and teaching. Compared to its first edition, the second edition draws a clear line in Chapter 5 to distinguish between technologies that have been extensively used in FL classroom and those that are or will be tested. In so doing, the author presents the history and future directions of CALL. It is a brave idea to discuss mobile and game-based learning (Chapter 8), which are extremely rare to find in a traditional FL classroom but certainly can benefit FL learners (Holden & Julie Sykes, 2013; Kim, et al., 2013; Peterson, 2013). Despite its introduction to numerous technologies, the volume is, by no means, a know-how handbook but a strong argument on the importance and feasibility of using technologies in FL education. Framed with theories and empirical evidence, the book elucidates the role of technology in classroom interaction and cross-cultural communication, showing how multiple technologies can be implemented in a FL classroom. Aside from a comprehensive review of educational technologies, the author renders
suggestions on how to choose and use technologies appropriately for various pedagogical designs.

For the aforementioned merits, I believe this book is an invaluable reference for both experienced researchers and CALL developers, and for teachers with limited experience in teaching with technology and developing CALL materials. L2 learners, instructors, and SLA researchers who are interested in technology-enhanced learning and teaching can refer to this book for an overview of the topic as well as suggestions on using technologies for specific pedagogical purposes (e.g., teaching an L2 to business majors).

References


