

Book review

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning for Specialized Domains. Elena Martín-Monje, Izaskun Elorza, and Blanca García Riaza (eds.) Routledge, Abingdon. pp. xxi+286.

Chris McGuirk

ctmcguirk@uclan.ac.uk

School of Languages and Global Studies, University of Central Lancashire, Preston,
Lancashire PR1 2HE, United Kingdom

Colpaert (p. xvii) describes this collection of articles on Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) as a ‘kaleidoscopic snapshot of an erupting volcano’. From my perspective, I find that description highly appropriate.

I have been an avid researcher into CALL since 2011; my Masters’ dissertation was action research involving Data-Driven Learning in class, and I have previously worked on designing materials for courseware and Moodle, delivering Continuing Professional Development courses on how to implement CALL in a language classroom setting. I know many of the pitfalls of incorporating CALL in our pedagogy because I have experienced them, both in contexts with relatively wide access to technology, such as South Korea, and contexts with relatively little, such as Sudan. CALL research is undoubtedly in a major, arguably untamed development phase, but relating it to the teacher who will likely have to use the technology is frequently the main challenge for researchers like ourselves.

As a result, this book intrigued me - the subheading promised a look at ‘practical applications and mobility’ which, for academics looking at their teaching practice, would make it a

welcome collection indeed. Unfortunately, though, I personally found myself with more ideas to interrogate than necessarily solutions to implement.

For instance, one of the biggest issues for teachers who may come to use technology in class has always been the rate of development; Pegrum (p. 10) confirms this by suggesting that digital literacy is being both shaped and driven by the technology with which learners need to become literate. In other words, the quicker technology develops, the more frequent the progress in terms of what our students need to use, in order to function in a digital society. He expounds this further (p. 12), suggesting that students need to become ‘designers of meaning’, developing their own understanding in an ever-changing world. The difficulty with this description is where the teachers fit into it – not very clearly, but it could also be inferred that the relative lack of involvement might be partly due to the fact that, as Pegrum highlights earlier in the article (p. 10), educators simply do not appear quick to embrace the changes. The evolution of a student's virtual, cyberspace self is not necessarily a new realisation; there is research to suggest that students do appear to develop a new persona when online.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (2010) talk about knowledge-building, where students feel as though they can participate in a safe, non-judgemental space, share ideas and be the learners they want to become. Furthermore, Rubio et al. (pp. 179) lend credence to this idea by highlighting one of the affordances of Language Massive Open Online Courses (LMOOCs) as being the fact that students have access to a widespread community platform where they can, not only learn a language, but also acquire new skills and specialist knowledge. However, the same article (Ibid, pp. 183–184) draws attention to the need for an instructor to very much drive the content of an LMOOC, especially in the materials design stage, so it could be inferred that although improvements in learner motivation are evident, there is still

room for discussion on how CALL developments impact on learner autonomy. Martín-Monje and Ventura (pp. 191–192) support this suggestion by looking at teaching specialised vocabulary, and citing the ideas of Nation (2001) and Coxhead (2013), both of whom are proposing solutions that involve the teacher guiding the learner to discoveries about language, even with the introduction of an LMOOC.

In the interest of balance, however, there are utterly absorbing moments in this collection where the writer has considered possibilities for increasing autonomy, and promoting student interrogation of CALL solutions. Two chapters where this is most evident are Sánchez Ramos and Moreno (pp. 230–234) where, in the context of Legal Translation Training, students are acquiring the tools to analyse real case studies and build their own bank of appropriate and inappropriate specialised Legal English, based on their own explorations of corpora, and Berber Sardinha (pp. 203–214). His article echoes the classic concordance research of Sinclair (1991) and Johns (1991), in the sense that the focus is on stepping back, allowing students to analyse language patterns for themselves, and come to their own conclusions.

From my perspective, the practical applications of CALL research often seem to be missed out; in this collection, the crucial questions raised were how teachers introduce autonomy with the CALL solutions mentioned and, as intriguing, what learners might do with the autonomy. Fortunately, there are some nice ideas in the collection on this point: Vinagre (pp. 23–34), for instance, recounts the findings of an online intercultural collaboration study between British and Spanish learners. The premise of learners sharing their experiences, beliefs and maybe misunderstandings about each other's cultures is an appealing idea for a project, but Vinagre does admit (p.32) that a limitation of the study was both groups of

students having visited each other's countries at least once, and for the reader, it creates a sense of wonderment about trying the same project with students who did not have this advantage.

Elsewhere, Underwood (pp. 129–139) emphasises that Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL), whether through specific tasks or through messaging apps, is beneficial to the enhancement of both individual and collaborative language learning. Pegrum (p. 19) comes to a similar conclusion, predicting that mobile literacy would develop into the ‘principle macroliteracy of our time.’ That said, it is worth acknowledging that Underwood (p. 131) appears to hint that autonomy using mobile learning is hard to guarantee, keen to stress that both teachers and learners may need to be persuaded as to why this technology is helpful. Underwood's (p.131) implied need to convince both teacher and learners flags the key issue with CALL as an emerging concept in the classroom – teachers who are looking to draw ideas from this research will likely be looking for something they can use with their students immediately. An obvious case of this is Pareja-Lora's (pp. 102–126) article on Ontotagger; there can be no denying that software with the ability to genuinely, accurately auto-correct students' work is a wonderful development, but would teachers be able to use this solution as is, and interpret it, or is there a research project following on from this, where the writer looks to produce a Phase 2, more user-friendly version of the technology for general classroom use?

My biggest struggle with this collection, to be honest, was that the issue of winning over hearts and minds, mentioned in the previous paragraph, was resonant in a number of chapters within the collection (see Beltran-Palánques, pp. 75–83; Read et al., pp. 151–161; Hockly, pp. 140–150, Fernández-Parra, pp. 243–254). Whether the study be Beltran-Palánques’

findings on synchronous computer-mediated communication, Read et al.'s investigation into Mobile-Assisted Language MOOCs (MALMOOCs), Hockly's fascinating ideas about the integration of MALL into a specialised syllabus or Fernández-Parra exploring the benefits of incorporating Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT), they are all extremely engaging articles, giving the reader considerable food for thought. The concern, however, is how a reader, presumably a pedagogue in a language classroom setting of some kind, would implement these exciting new concepts into their personal educational contexts.

Referring back to the subheading of this book, 'Practical applications and mobility', there is an argument for the practical applications being more targeted at researchers than teachers, and this is where, from my viewpoint, CALL research often loses sight of the prize. If, as researchers, we are looking for practitioners to truly harness the potential of CALL in their personal teaching contexts, then we need to look at how our findings can be implemented in the classroom from a purely pragmatic, practical perspective.

Taking that into consideration, I find myself having mixed feelings about this collection; on the one hand, it is a highly insightful, enjoyable exploration of several aspects of CALL and MALL research. On the other hand, it manages to serve as a stark reminder that there is a demonstrable gulf between theory and practice in the field of CALL, and it may be that future CALL research needs to focus less on the theoretical benefits and more on the practical implications, in order to achieve what seems to be the global aim of researchers within this field: to enable teachers across the world, in a variety of contexts, to be able to take advantage of the pedagogical sea change brought about by the rise of CALL technologies.

To sum up, there is no doubt that this book is an excellent volume of musings on the different directions of CALL research, but Colpaert (p. xvii) is right when he refers to it as ‘kaleidoscopic’. The clear message is that the possibilities are indeed endless, but also potentially difficult to see or interpret. As a result, it could be implied that the aim for future research is to make those endless possibilities contextually-relevant for our desired end user – the teacher. In that regard, I personally felt that, overall, this collection forgot a step.

References

- Coxhead, A. (2013). Vocabulary and ESP. In B. Partridge, & S. Starfield (Eds.), *The handbook of English for specific purposes* (pp. 115-132). Boston, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Johns, T. (1991). Should you be persuaded: Two samples of data-driven learning materials. *ELR Journal*, 4, 1-16.
- Nation, P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (2010). A brief history of knowledge building. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology/La revue canadienne de l'apprentissage et de la technologie*, 36(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.21432/T2859M>.
- Sinclair, J. (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford University Press.