

REVIEW OF *SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE NET GENERATION*

Second Language Teaching and Learning in the Net Generation

Raquel Oxford and Jeffrey Oxford (Editors)

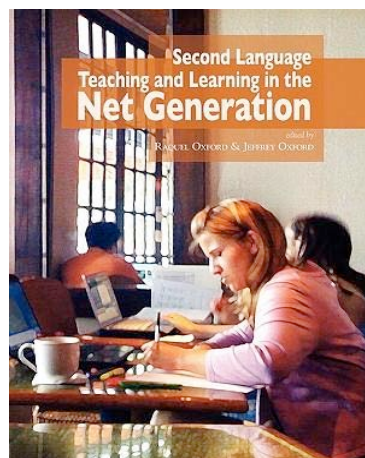
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In the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), the term “Net Generation” has been clearly defined by Prensky (2001), who states that Net Generation members are “digital natives” since they “[have] spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (p. 1), all of which make them different from the baby boomer generation. For those who are eager to learn more about the language learning needs and necessities of the Net Generation, the edited book by Oxford and Oxford (2009), entitled *Second Language Teaching and Learning in the Net Generation* is a must-read resource. Since most of the contributors to the book are second and foreign language instructors as well as researchers, almost every chapter of the book describes empirical studies involving different innovative technologies and state-of-the-art tools, offering pedagogical ideas, effective strategies, and useful suggestions on how these technologies could be applied to enhance language teaching and learning.

The book comprises 14 chapters that include a wide range of topics. In Chapter 1, van Compernelle and Williams look into technology as a means of communication that can potentially contribute to the implementation of “intercultural communication, sociolinguistic and pragmatic development, and online communication and linguistic accuracy” (p. 11) and review advantages and disadvantages of each of these areas. In Chapter 2, Niño provides information about Internet based technologies, such as [Google](#), [wikis](#), [Blogs](#), [Skype](#), [YouTube](#), Podcasting, and social networking sites, offering particularly useful and teacher-friendly suggestions on how these tools could be used in second language teaching and learning. For example, language learners can use Google to learn vocabulary (e.g., find correct spelling, look for appropriate collocations), collaborate on writing tasks; similarly, teachers can provide ESL writers with written feedback via [Google Docs](#) and furthermore utilize [Google Talk](#) to create opportunities for interaction in the target language. Chapter 3 reports on a study that investigated the computer competence of secondary school students, teachers, and administrators in a school in Germany in an attempt to examine whether there was a gap between theory and practice in terms of the participants’ computer-media literacy. Although responses to questionnaires revealed that the teachers believed that computer literacy skills were important for the future of the students, the majority of the students claimed that they had acquired essential computer skills, as well as online browsing techniques, not from their teachers but by themselves.

Chapters 4 and 5, after providing an informative synopsis of the background, as well as the current status,

of hybrid curricula (i.e., activities which could be done largely online instead of in a traditional classroom) in second and foreign language teaching, respond to an ongoing question about whether or not digital natives are ready for hybrid foreign-language instruction. In Chapter 4, Goertler believes that college students are “maybe” ready to benefit from hybrid (i.e., blended) courses. She also claims that it cannot be “assumed that because someone is a digital native that that person wants to learn any particular subject matter in a digital format” (p. 61). She further adds that certain constraints, such as language learning preferences and computer literacy skills, need to be taken into account even among the members of the Net Generation. In Chapter 6, Raquel Oxford examines the use of writing-assistant programs ([Atajo 3.0](#) and [Spanish Partner](#)) to improve the writing skills of learners of Spanish in terms of quality and quantity, particularly the use of grammar and vocabulary, in their compositions. Chapters 7 and 8 provide information about studies that examined podcasts and their use in language teaching and learning. The authors of Chapter 7, Bird-Soto and Rengel, provide examples from their own experience of the challenges and learning curves they had to master and teaching insights they gained before, during, and after they launched *Personalidades*. This project was integrated into a course curriculum to give intermediate to advanced learners of Spanish an opportunity to improve their listening and speaking skills, as well as develop interaction among students and teachers through interviews which were later posted on discussion boards. In Chapter 8, Ducate and Lomicka describe a study in which learners of German and French, after receiving instruction on how to create a podcast session, were asked to create their own podcast as a course requirement. In addition to podcasting posts on special blogs, the students also had to write comments on their blogs about their learning experience with podcasting.

In Chapter 9, Lazo-Wilson and Espejo demonstrate how blogs could be used in language classrooms and report on a study in which blogs were set up successfully for three different Spanish courses at [Eastern Washington University](#) with the objective to review grammar, expand vocabulary, and broaden students’ cultural awareness. Chapter 10 focuses on students’ utterances collected from WebCT sessions, primarily used to create a “data-driven learning” approach (Johns, 1991, p. 27) to teaching grammar rules to learners of French. Chapters 11 and 12 describe several online activities involving [Second Life](#) (SL), “an online virtual community that is being created by its residents in which they can own land and build houses and either rent or reside in them” (p. 154). After logging on to SL, the students were able to practice target language via activities (e.g., inviting lecturers from different countries, teaching vocabulary by using visual cues in 3D format, organizing field trips to popular buildings and sites in the world), which are often difficult to organize quickly in real life, especially in a traditional classroom environment. In chapter 13, Warren describes the pros and cons of web-based portfolios and their pedagogical asset to teaching target language culture to foreign language students. In Chapter 14, Charbonneau-Gowdy talks about the role of *Sociocultural Theory* and technology in teaching English to NATO-supported military personnel and explains how this online project generated collaborative and empowering dialogues between teachers and learners during the course of the program.

Although the book covers a broad range of topics in terms of different tools, varied technology, diverse research interests and studies involving different learner populations, all 14 chapters have one theme in common: the use of technology can supplement and enhance language learning and teaching particularly in the era of the Net Generation. The suggested activities in the book can certainly meet the needs of language instructors who often look for innovative ways to use technology in a foreign and second language teaching setting. Technologies ranging from SL, podcasting, blogs, wikis, Internet-based activities to language learning software are believed to be the kind of tools the Net Generation are already familiar with. Podcasting, for instance, has already entered the realm of language learning (Thorne & Payne, 2005) and is believed to accelerate language acquisition through new applications and creative podcasting broadcasts. Teachers can use podcast episodes to teach listening skills, speaking strategies, and pronunciation, as well as raise learner’s awareness about cultural differences (Fox, 2008). In fact, learners whose language classes incorporated podcast sessions and podcasting related activities (reported

in Chapters 7 and 8) spoke positively of this tool and believed that it improved their listening skills, exposed them to different accents, enabled them to record their own voices, and gave them ample opportunities to explore the target language. Despite such positive comments, O'Bryan and Hegelheimer (2008) caution that "podcast users and developers should focus on what this technology may add to an existing program of study and reflect on how it may transform language learning" (p. 346). This statement clearly indicates that technology alone does not make language acquisition happen; instead, it facilitates the language learning process.

Integrating new innovative tools and emerging technologies into a traditional curriculum will require a hybrid approach to language teaching and learning, with instruction being done partially outside of the classroom depending on the different technologies. Chapters 4 and 5 provide detailed information about the implications of hybrid courses for foreign and second language learning/teaching. Both chapters claim that the majority of foreign language learners at U.S. universities support the importance of the use of technology in second language learning since their language skills improved. Interestingly, among learners of the Net Generation are also those who express more negative attitudes toward hybrid instruction due to previous, presumably negative, experiences with the use of technology in language classrooms. Some of the frustrations result from the fact that even 'digital natives' still need special assistance with certain technological tools (e.g., creating podcast episodes; using SL). As a response to these attitudes, Goertler (in Chapter 4) counters that the few negative answers from learners should not hinder the development of hybrid language learning since the mindsets and attitudes of learners towards the use of technology can vary based on their personality, language learning styles, and preferences.

In addition to emerging technologies and their connection to pedagogy, Chapters 11 and 12 discuss how SL can be used in language teaching. Clark, in Chapter 11, shares ideas on how SL can be integrated into a course syllabus and suggests interactive activities that can bring creativity into an existing curriculum. The recommended activities, such as learning Spanish vocabulary with visual cues, introducing each other's avatars (i.e., an image representing "real" people in online games, chat rooms, and online virtual worlds), learning Spanish culture, are worth trying because these activities promote interaction and raise cultural awareness among learners. Based on previous research involving SL, Cooke-Plagwitz, Chapter 12, recommends effective ways to incorporate other online tools (e.g., supplementary webpages, videos, podcasts, wikis) into SL to create even more interactive activities for language learners. However, the author also warns SL users of certain problematic sides of SL because "its interface is not particularly intuitive, and its learning curve is fairly steep" (p. 177). This issue was also encountered in a study by Sadler & Nurmukhamedov (2008), in which high intermediate ESL students were given tasks using SL, such as constructing tables, building different shapes, and looking for different items in a designated area. Even though the participants understood the instructions for the tasks, the students could not finish the tasks within the designated time frame of 45 minutes because the participants were all "newbies" (i.e., a term used by SL members to refer to somebody who does not have much experience using the virtual world). Clearly, teachers' and students' patience and practice are required to overcome learning curves while using technology in foreign language learning setting.

Surprisingly, however, while the book emphasizes the use of technology in foreign and second language learning, only two chapters include images of the types of technology described ([Wimba voice chat](#), and discussion board; video-based conferencing software [Waveasy](#)). For readers who have only recently started integrating and using technology, the inclusion of images could help see or imagine the mentioned technology and/or tools as students engage in activities. Additionally, URL addresses of software and programs (e.g., SL; university-based learner-friendly blogs) have not been provided either, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, for educators to use these resources and techniques in different classroom settings. Currently, interested readers will have to find information about the mentioned software or the website URLs themselves. Although techies (those who are technologically savvy) might be familiar with most of the resources and websites provided in the chapters, for both tech-aficionados and tech-novices,

the absence of URLs could be a slight inconvenience.

However, despite these inconveniences, the book editors Oxford and Oxford manage to fulfill its overall purpose, namely “how technology is both being used and can be used to improve second language acquisition” (p. 2) in the ever expanding Net Generation. The chapters have been carefully selected to address the issues based on research and practical explanations, making this book appropriate for a range of audiences: techies, tech-aficionados, and tech-novices. For this reason, this book can function as a useful practical resource for instructors working in intensive language programs and eager to incorporate state-of-the-art technologies into their existing syllabi, and university faculty who teach CALL related courses at the university level. These audiences will benefit from the research ideas, listed literature in the references section, and classroom-friendly practical suggestions provided in the book.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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