REVIEW OF BRAVE NEW DIGITAL CLASSROOM:
TECHNOLOGY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Brave New Digital Classroom: Technology and Foreign Language Learning

Robert J. Blake

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As new technological tools continue to emerge and impact foreign language (FL) learning, language teachers and researchers are facing the question of how to best utilize the vast array of technological tools in the language classroom while keeping abreast of the rapid changes in the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) world (Chapelle, 2003; Chapelle & Douglas, 2006). *Brave New Digital Classroom: Technology and Foreign Language Learning* grounds its advocacy of technology-enhanced FL curricula in second language acquisition (SLA) research and theoretical frameworks and addresses the pivotal issue of how technology can be effectively implemented in the service of language teaching and learning in a reader-friendly and informative fashion.

The target audience of this book includes not only language teachers but also experienced CALL researchers and instructors. *Brave New Digital Classroom* brings insights into the potential of CALL for language teachers venturing into the field and succinctly explains different technology options that teachers can employ in their classrooms, such as the Web and computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools. The book also provides accessible explanations of and rationales for the use of technology in language teaching for readers with varying degrees of computer literacy or experience in teaching language with technology. The author, Robert J. Blake, encourages seasoned practitioners to reflect on his standpoints by engaging them in discussion questions and activities at the end of each chapter. Instructors who use this book in graduate seminars, such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning or Technology and SLA, may find the list of questions useful and challenging for their students; additionally, graduate students who are looking for research topics in CALL may find some questions worthy of further investigation.

Brave New Digital Classroom comprises six chapters and addresses wide-ranging topics. Chapter One opens with an overview of the misconceptions about using technology in the FL curriculum and suggests a theoretical framework that underpins the practices of CALL. Blake advocates a realistic assessment of what technology can do in the language classroom. He stresses that successful teaching practices should be informed by SLA theories and emphasizes an interactionist approach. Blake's argument is that " [t]he technology is theoretically and methodologically neutral. But how technology is used—its particular culture of practice—is not neutral; it responds to what the practitioners understand or believe to be true about SLA" (p. 11).

This argument is a critical reminder for CALL practitioners that technology-enhanced instruction alone cannot guarantee success unless it is based on a sound theoretical underpinning. Following the interactionist stance (Gass, 1997; Long, 1991), Blake claims "a second language is best learned and taught through interaction" (p. 3). He reviews Krashen's SLA model of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), the social aspects of the SLA process (Doughty, 1998; Gass, 1997), and the practical approach of focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998). This concise review of SLA theories and the theoretical implications for the use of technology in the FL classroom provide seasoned CALL practitioners with a good foundation before delving into the digital classroom.

Chapter Two focuses on the applications of the Web in the language classroom. In the "Internet Basics" section, Blake explains technical terms, such as HTTP, HTML, and URLs to help language teachers understand the basic notions about the Internet and Web page design. For language teachers who are interested in creating their own Web pages, Blake suggests the use of JavaScript or DHTML because they are easier to learn. Teachers are encouraged to use more interaction-oriented Web sites to facilitate language acquisition. While this is a valid point, interested language teachers may want to know specific Web sites they can use in their own teaching. Unfortunately, Blake does not provide any concrete Web sites that teachers can refer to.

Blake argues that a clear pedagogy for Web-based language learning is vital. He advocates the Content-Based Instruction (CBI) approach to the teaching of target language culture and grammar points within a Web-based learning environment. A CBI lesson starts with identifying a topic consistent with the goals of the curriculum and the learners, and is followed by finding Web passages that deal with the topic, and guiding students to carry out additional Web searches collaboratively to enhance their learning. Novice language teachers who favor this approach will find the step-by-step instruction easy to follow; nonetheless, experienced teachers might find these suggestions customary and conventional.

Chapter Three begins with a brief history of CALL with respect to technological innovations, and is followed by the introduction of the professional acceptance of CALL as a sub-field of SLA. While Blake's introduction to the history of CALL is rather concise and informative, its placement in the third chapter following the discussion of the Web applications in Chapter Two seems somewhat out of order. It would have been better if this information were provided in Chapter One, along with the introduction of SLA theories, because readers would be better able to relate the development of CALL to specific references of different approaches to SLA over time.

In the second half of Chapter Three, Blake introduces tutorial CALL, a concept that implies that computers can function as language tutors to enhance language learning with little or no real language instructor present**.** Although this idea sounds daunting, Blake introduces several programs to showcase how the tutorial CALL works. For example, the online program WordChamp allows language learners to paste a reading passage into a text box on the Web site. The program then automatically analyzes the passage and provides a gloss of vocabulary words upon cursor rollover in the user specified languages. Complete Web pages can be translated simply by specifying their URLs. Learners may find this translation function fascinating because of its comprehensive coverage of languages and ease of use. Teachers may find the free online tutorial programs useful in enhancing learners' reading comprehension and extending learners' word inventories, but learners may neglect to develop relevant guessing-meaning-from-context-clues strategies.

Blake suggests that language teachers who are interested in creating their own tutorial CALL programs as a supplement to their technology-enhanced classroom can employ Web-based authoring tools, such as the *Interactive Language Learning Authoring Package* developed by the Department of Language Studies at London Guildhall University*, ExTemplate* developed by the Language Resource Center at Rice University, *SMILE* developed by CLEAR at Michigan State University, and *Hot Potatoes* initially developed at the University of Victoria, Canada. These tools are user-friendly and cost-effective.

However, teachers need to be aware that most of the current tutorial CALL programs are not able to provide learners with context-sensitive or error-specific feedback as a human tutor could. To tackle the issue of how to make computer programs more adaptive and responsive, iCALL (i.e., intelligent CALL) and automatic speech recognition (ASR) have been developed, with the help of recent development in artificial intelligence. Free online iCALL programs, such as E-Tutor for German and Robo-Sensei for Japanese, are parser-based programs that can provide feedback on learners' syntactic and sometimes semantic input. ASR applications, such as *Tell Me More Pro*, can recognize production of individual sounds and give learners visual feedback, such as pitch contours.

Chapter Three ends with a "CALL Evaluation" section. Blake refers to some commonly used techniques for evaluating CALL programs and activities; examples are the CALL evaluation checklist provided by the *Information and Communications Technology for Language Teachers Project*, downloadable from its Web site; an evaluation framework that *CALICO Journal* formulated; Hubbard's framework (2006), which is concerned with the fit between CALL software and a teacher's teaching methods; and Chapelle's (2001) interactionist theory driven framework.

Chapter Four introduces two different modes of CMC: real time (synchronous, SCMC) and deferred time (asynchronous, ACMC). The ACMC tools include e-mail, electronic mailing lists (listservs), discussion forums, blogs, and wikis. The discussion forums, such as the use of course management systems like *WebCT, Blackboard*, and *Moodle*, and collaborative Web sites, such as Wikis, can provide language learners with a semipublic writing area where they can chat and interact with others using the target languages. Personal blogs can be incorporated in the FL curriculum to encourage learners to keep a journal of their experience learning a FL language.

Turning to SCMC, Blake introduces text-based chat programs, such as *ICQ, MSN Messenger*, and AOL's *Instant Messenger*, and voice chatting programs such as *Breeze, Skype,* and *YackPack*. These tools provide learners with opportunities not only to increase the quantity of their written and oral output, but also to engage in real interactions with other learners as well as the target language culture and community.

Blake presents a case study to illustrate an ideal SCMC implementation within a psycholinguistic framework that focuses on negotiations of meaning and corrective feedback (Doughty & Long, 2003). He details the exchange of both text and audio messages between a first-year Spanish L2 student and her instructor and discusses how this type of bimodal chatting scaffolds the learner's linguistic development through the instructor's provision for elaborate input and error correction. For language teachers who are experimenting with adding SCMC components to their teaching practices, this case study highlights some principal points for consideration, such as the importance of involving learners in the process of message exchanges and providing timely feedback orally or in written form to raise learners' metalinguistic awareness. While these points are important, language teachers need to be mindful that the use of SCMC tools may incur daunting extra workload; therefore, the teacher's realistic assessment of the availability of time resources is needed.

Blake moves on to discuss the potential of using CMC tools to additionally foster intercultural communicative competence (ICC) within the sociocultural approach to SLA. This method is more commonly known as telecollaboration, in which online communication is used to involve language learners from different countries to work together on projects or to undertake intercultural exchanges. Blake presents the *Cultura Project* developed at MIT in the late 1990s to showcase how the implementation of telecollaboration improved the language ability and ICC of a group of intermediate and advanced L2 learners. This project engaged students from France and the United States in exchanges of opinions about their own cultural values through different modes of telecollaboration, such as the use of online surveys and videoconferences. Blake suggests that successful implementation of telecollaboration requires teachers' active participation in and organization of the activities; additionally, learners' culture

and age backgrounds, and the design of the curriculum also need to be taken into consideration. Experienced teachers, however, may find these suggestions not drastically different from the implementation of non-Web based activities.

Chapter Five introduces different formats of Distance Learning (DL) language courses, including teleconferences, hybrid/blended, and virtual courses. DL refers to the instructional systems that use different modes of technologies to deliver language courses online. Teleconferencing involves the use of two-way interactive TV that allows teachers to reach students at a remote site; hybrid or blended courses combine both classroom instruction and students' individual work through a technology component while in virtual language courses, teachers and students interact with each other entirely online.

Although DL courses are growing in popularity, little is known about the efficacy of these courses as compared to face-to-face courses (Winke & Goertler, 2008). Blake's critical review of existing studies about hybrid courses, such as Adair-Hauck, Willingham-McLain, and Earnest-Youngs (1999), Chenoweth, Jones, and Tucker (2006), Chenoweth and Murday (2003) and Scida and Saury (2006), yields contradictory findings with regard to the value of hybrid courses. He argues that the interpretation of these research findings may have been complicated by respective research design and specific learning contexts in each study. In contrast, Blake's review of three studies focusing on courses taught entirely online (Blake & Delforge, 2005; Cahill & Catanzaro, 1997; Soo & Ngeow, 1998) brings more uniform results. Overall, the improvement in language skills of students who participated in the virtual courses was found to be significantly greater than that of students who were in traditional classes. Going beyond the scope of previous studies, Blake suggests that future research on the effectiveness of online courses needs to consider the effects of other intervening factors on the experimental treatment design, such as learner characteristics, teaching methods, and media attributes. Taken together, the exhaustive list of literature reviewed provides readers with a better understanding of the capabilities of DL language courses and the usefulness of different types of DL formats. The review is also a good source of references for interested readers to look for gaps in the effectiveness of DL courses in relation to learner variables and instructional methods for further investigation.

The chapter continues with a discussion of the critical issue of whether DL classes can provide language learners with adequate practice in speaking or not. A case study, *Spanish Without Walls (SWW),* is presented to show how DL contributed to learners' oral proficiency development, making a case for DL courses as a possible format of language instruction that enhances oral performance. Drawing upon the experience from the *SWW* project and the divergent findings from previous studies, Blake concludes the chapter by stating the real challenge that DL is facing now is how to implement DL courses within a sound pedagogical framework, a central theme throughout the book.

Chapter Six synthesizes the common themes addressed explicitly or implicitly throughout the book. Blake re-emphasizes that the cornerstone of the brave new digital classroom is not *what* but *how* technology is used. A successful technology-enhanced FL curriculum is student-centered, carefully planned, technically well-supported, and most importantly, pedagogically well-constructed. To this end, Blake, following Selber's (2004) three types of computer literacy, suggests that teachers and students alike should develop not only functional computer literacy, but also critical literacy, which shows their capability to reflect on what they are doing, and rhetorical literacy, which refers to users' ability to put their thoughts about the use of technology into practice.

Blake outlines a specific pedagogy for a rhetorically-based digital classroom with reference to Laurillard's (2002) iterative conversational framework. This framework proposes that after teachers initiate or start out certain classroom activities, specific lesson plans need to be formulated based on a dialogic process in response to students' respective ideas and reflections about their own learning. Blake suggests that language teachers activate this iterative learning process by using different technological tools, such as the Web or CMC tools. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that more concrete

examples or activities as to how to incorporate the theoretical concepts into actual classroom instruction are not provided. Readers may find this framework conceptually sound; however, without more specific instruction on the set-up procedure, it may be practically difficult for novice teachers to adopt such an approach. Blake ends the chapter by emphasizing the responsibility for the CALL field to train new teachers and re-train seasoned educators in the use of technology and to promote teachers' willingness to move toward a more student-centered, technology-enhanced language classroom.

At the end of the book, an appendix and a glossary are provided. The appendix supplements Chapter Five and gives statistical explanations of the learning outcomes in the *Spanish Without Walls* project. Language teachers who are not familiar with basic inferential statistics such as *t*-tests and *p*-values will find the explanation helpful. The concise glossary that defines technical terms, such as ACMC, ARS, and MOO, provides those who are new to the field with a quick and easy way to find definitions.

Overall, *Brave New Digital Classroom: Technology and Foreign Language Learning* is a concise, well-written, and accessible book that will appeal to language teachers, educators, and researchers who are interested in learning more about CALL research and best practices in the FL classroom. The organization and presentation of the content and the breadth of the discussion in this book reflect Blake's insightful and thorough concerns about the different aspects of technology-enhanced FL curricula. Graduate students interested in the field of CALL will find a good deal of references and informed discussion on the use of technology in language instruction. One major strength of the book is its emphasis on grounding CALL practices within a sound theoretical framework. To this end, Blake dexterously interweaves and draws upon interactionist perspectives throughout the book.

However, the introduction of the theoretical framework is relatively brief and not as in depth as it could be. A more thorough discussion of the concepts of input, interaction, different types of corrective feedback, implicit and explicit form-focused instruction in relation to SLA development should have been added to scaffold readers' understanding of the relationship between the theoretical underpinning and the efficacy of different technological tools. Additionally, while Blake covers a wide range of best practices of technological tools in the FL language classroom, hands-on information regarding how to design CALL activities and explicit language classroom applications are noticeably absent in the book. For example, language teachers may want to know how to design engaging classroom activities using specific Web sites, or how to form well-structured CMC-facilitated pair work. More step-by-step procedures as to how to set up these activities in the language classrooms would be appreciated by interested language teachers who are seeking practical guidance in creating their own teaching materials. Nevertheless, with these caveats in mind, readers will find this book a timely contribution to the CALL world and an excellent reference on the bookshelf or in the library.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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