

Review of *Focus on learning technologies*

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Focus on learning technologies

Hockly, N.

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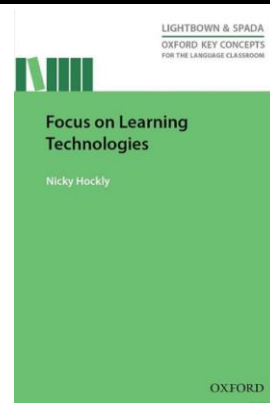
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Given worldwide technological advances and government initiatives to integrate them into almost every corner of the curriculum, practitioners and researchers can agree that language teacher competence and knowledge about integrating technology into the curriculum is critical (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016; Tour, 2015; Warschauer, Cotten, & Ames, 2012). Written by Hockly, the book *Focus on learning technologies* is one of the seven titles in the series *Oxford key concepts for the language classroom* by Oxford University Press that addresses this need. The book provides the most current information on computer-assisted language learning (CALL) for educators “who are new to learning technologies, and also experienced teachers who may be using technologies regularly in their classrooms and are interested in exploring what the research has to say about them” (p. 1). As a CALL practitioner and researcher myself, I see the main value of this book in that it is accessible and succinct, with only five chapters and about 130 pages of main content. The author explains critical concepts and employs a writing style that is both articulate and easy to understand, treating almost all of the essentials of using learning technologies for language learning in a slim volume. Thus, it is an ideal tool for teachers who lead busy professional lives and wish to learn more about the integration of technology in language classrooms in their spare time. For these reasons, I believe this book is a great entry-level reading for teachers and researchers interested in CALL.

In Chapter 1, Hockly provides the definition of learning technologies and an overview of the history of CALL. In discussing the definition, she emphasizes that, as we read and reflect upon the examples in this book, we should center our focus on considering the way students and teachers interact with technology. The author’s comprehensive overview of CALL history includes both a brief discussion of the name *CALL* and an informative summary on the course of CALL software development and design. She explains that the term CALL came to existence in the 1980s and is still widely used because of its rich research history. She cites important scholarly work on the subject and describes the well-known three stages of CALL: (1) behavioristic, structural, restricted; (2) communicative, open; and (3) integrative, integrated (e.g., Bax, 2003; Warschauer, 1996). The author also notes a potential fourth stage related to the notion of connectivism (Siemens, 2005).

Hockly then offers 10 statements about using technologies in the language classroom, inviting readers to rate the degree to which they agree or disagree, helping them to explicate their initial position toward learning technologies prior to continuing. The chapter also discusses the critical issue of digital divides. I

know from my own experience as a CALL teacher and educator that many language teachers are extremely interested in the issue of digital divides or inequalities caused by technology use, since many of them work with underserved populations, such as English language learners or students with disabilities. I applaud the author for touching upon a critical topic less discussed in CALL literature, yet I believe the book might benefit from a more extensive discussion and concrete suggestions on how practitioners can address digital divides in the classroom.

In Chapter 2, Hockly discusses major theories and theoretical perspectives in CALL research. With an introduction to the concepts of 21st century skills and digital literacies, readers are reminded that the value of integrating technology into language and literacy education goes beyond supporting traditional literacy skills and that integrating technology can also prepare students for engaging in digital literacy practices. The author provides an overview of three important frameworks for conceptualizing language learning and technology: interactionist, sociocultural, and ecological. In the chapter, readers learn about the critical scholarly works and foci of each perspective and consider the strengths and constraints of each. The overview is extremely useful to novice researchers, particularly those who hope to expand their understanding of the critical frameworks in the field.

Empirical findings from the large body of CALL research are further discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. Although Hockly divides the topics and research into two chapters based on whether the research and topics concern young learners or adolescent learners, many of the topics in both chapters can be applied to both populations. At the beginning of Chapter 3, on primary school contexts, the author provides a great thinking activity with critical questions that prompts readers to think reflectively and draws them into the chapter (p. 65). Many of the questions are commonly asked by elementary school teachers, such as “Are issues such as children spending too much time in front of screens relevant to teachers?” and “Can technologies designed for older users, such as social networking sites and virtual worlds, have a place in the primary classroom?” Next, the author discusses two key issues related to young learners’ use of technology, screen time, and e-safety. Regarding screen time, the author cites several studies to caution against the probable negative effects of extensive screen time and warns readers, “replacing kinesthetic and experiential learning activities with computer software is clearly not an advisable way forward for teaching young children” (p. 68). Regarding e-safety, the author stresses the importance of having a national and schoolwide e-safety policy to guide safe online practices for both students and teachers. She then discusses how policy factors impact the use of technology in primary schools, including the inclusive approach to special education, the *One laptop per child* initiative, and one-to-one initiatives. She problematizes the techno-solutionism implicated in the initiatives, later emphasizing that the money needs to go to “improving school buildings, training teachers, and providing appropriate pedagogical materials, not on the latest hardware” (p. 127).

In the second half of the chapter, Hockly discusses current CALL empirical research on using technology with primary school students, focusing on four areas: vocabulary acquisition, reading, writing, and speaking and listening. In general, research seems to present mixed results in terms of the effectiveness of CALL, yet the author uses some empirical studies to highlight effective pedagogical considerations coupled with technology uses, concluding, “what seems to be key is the role of learning technologies in supporting student motivation and allowing for enhanced learning opportunities—for example, the opportunity to communicate in real time with children in other parts of the world” (p. 94).

Chapter 4 focuses on adolescent learners’ technology use in formal and informal learning environments, particularly their online interactions. The discussion about online identity and “technolects” (p. 97) is interesting and informative. Hockly also discusses online and blended education, which is gaining in popularity across the globe, providing examples from Carpe Diem Collegiate High School and the Florida Virtual School. In light of the lack of research on support of online and blended language education, the author calls for further research. She then continues her discussion on findings from CALL empirical studies. In terms of vocabulary acquisition, she discusses the effect of multimedia and cellphone-based applications including SMS messaging, geotagging, and augmented reality. She argues that research on

multimedia and SMS messaging shows mixed results, although geotagging and augmented reality seem to show great potential for learning vocabulary in certain contexts. With regard to reading comprehension, it is suggested that research mainly focuses on comparing reading comprehension outcomes and preferences in different mediums (e.g., paper, online, cell phone). The author then provides an overview of studies that focus on supporting and understanding L2 writing via technology applications, including automated writing evaluation, wikis, blogs, online discussion forums, social networking sites, and text-based communication technologies. Overall, positive outcomes are reported. Different technology applications have afforded increases in writing motivation, collaborative writing processes, interpersonal communication skills, and teacher-student interactions. Text-based communication technologies further help improve speaking and decrease student anxiety level.

Chapter 4 ends with studies and tools associated with listening and speaking skills. Hockly mentions that speech recognition software, like chat bots and voice response systems, has the potential to improve students' speaking fluency and motivation. She also mentions that massively multiplayer online role-playing games show great promise for improving students' speaking and listening because "good games can create talk and text, both in the game and outside of it, in an interest-driven site where players discuss the game, gameplay, and problem-solving, gaining metacognitive and metalinguistic skills" (p. 121).

In the final chapter, the author refers back to the 10 statements about learning technologies, presented in Chapter 1, to engage reader reconsideration of their reflections. She provides her responses to each statement as a way of summarizing the key points in the book, in effect framing the entire discussion. She then once again cautions about a technocentric view on learning, but concludes that we should not deny the role of technology in language learning practices. Rather, we should "ensure that our own use of learning technologies with our students, both in and outside the classroom, is based on a sound understanding of the research and thoughtfully integrated into a sound pedagogy" (p. 132).

Overall, *Focus on learning technologies* provides a succinct introduction to fundamental knowledge about integrating technologies in language teaching and learning. However, the book could benefit from expanding on the discussion of some critical topics. First of all, as the author notes, online K–12 schools have been gaining popularity. As we are seeing an increasing number of full-time and part-time online language instructors seeking insights into teaching languages online, it would be useful if the discussion of online learning in Chapter 4 could be expanded to provide more practical pedagogical suggestions for teaching both young and adolescent learners online. Second, the digital divide is like an elephant in the room whose impact on CALL we recognize but rarely discuss in terms of research and teacher professional development. As mentioned, I do applaud the author for touching upon this critical issue in Chapter 1, but I believe aspiring readers would be very interested in seeing more in-depth discussions on the different perspectives of digital divides (e.g., socioeconomic, gender, cultural, geographical) and more practical suggestions toward addressing the issues as the change agents. To that end, it might be beneficial to include additional sections discussing teaching languages in low technology access environments.

Focus on learning technologies provides a clear overview of the theoretical background and key empirical studies of CALL, ensuring that this book is a worthwhile read. One strength of this book is its inviting and approachable tone, which appeals to both practitioners and emerging scholars. As a CALL teacher educator, I work with in-service language teachers and novice graduate students who have limited understanding of CALL. One of the challenges I encounter when teaching CALL courses is to find articles or book chapters written in plain language and containing up-to-date information grounded in research findings. Other notable features include the classroom snapshots in every chapter, which provide cases of technology implementations in schools and language classrooms, helping the readers visualize the ideas under discussion. Moreover, the thinking and discussion activities allow the readers to pause and reflect on their own experiences and perceptions, and to engage in dialogic interactions with the content. In short, the book is a valuable resource for engaging practitioners and novice researchers in critical conversations about integrating technology into language teaching and learning.

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