

## *Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

### **Teaching Languages Online, 2nd Edition**

by Carla Meskill and Natasha Anthony

Toronto, Ontario: Multilingual Matters, 2015, 237 pages

ISBN: 978-1-78309-376-2 (paperback)

### **Reviewed by / Revu par**

Reuben Vyn

University of Iowa

As the digital world continues to transform at an overwhelming rate, affecting *what* resources are available and *how* we interact with one another, the need for an updated edition of such a volume is apparent. By adding new illustrations and contextual examples, as well as addressing learner attentiveness and the growth of 3D learning in language teaching, Meskill and Anthony continue to provide pedagogical support for language educators who teach all or part of their courses online. Meskill and Anthony acknowledge that multiple online environments or modes of interaction may often be used in concert within one teaching context; however, their intentional dissection here serves to underscore the affordances of each in promoting students' engagement and furthering their learning.

*Teaching Languages Online* begins with an outline of the four environments—oral synchronous, oral asynchronous, written synchronous, and written asynchronous—and a discussion of the fundamentals of online language teaching, with specific attention to how it differs from instruction in traditional face-to-face language classrooms. Central to this discussion is an historical summary of the sociocultural view of learning, from which arises the notion of instructional conversations that provide the basis for the dialogic process of learning. Eight specific instructional conversation moves are identified—calling

attention to forms, calling attention to lexis, corraling, saturating, using linguistic traps, modeling, providing explicit feedback, and providing implicit feedback—that later provide the sequential structure for each of the four primary chapters, which discuss their successful integration and realization in each unique environment. These chapters are grouped according to oral and written environments and are each followed by brief chapters offering suggestions for amplifying teaching and learning with complimentary modes of interaction. In the final chapter, Meskill and Anthony discuss how the development of students' skills are addressed in online environments, and provide examples of how curricula can be effectively designed to meet learning goals of diverse groups of students. Meskill and Anthony naturally emphasize the advantages of teaching languages online, many of which capitalize on the ways learners are already accustomed to interacting via the use of digital devices. On the other hand, potential complications and challenges that often accompany online teaching and learning of languages tend to be minimized. While the focus of this volume is admittedly not on the technical aspects of online teaching, this reader was anticipating greater emphasis on how to navigate the unique pedagogical demands and challenges in designing and executing instruction in an online environment. For example, Meskill and Anthony addressed the intensifying issue of learner attentiveness in the introduction but then did not consistently incorporate discussion of how to creatively engage learners in light of the distractions they face throughout the remaining chapters.

A particular strength of this volume is the extensive use of examples and illustrations of instructional conversation moves in a variety of languages to document successful ways of engaging students in online interaction. This documentation of the practical aspects of online language teaching makes the content extremely accessible, particularly for educators with little to no experience with online teaching. However, it should be noted that the examples occasionally portray the kind of teaching about the language, which is generally discouraged in the sociocultural perspective they adopt. Additionally, some examples regress toward a more traditional Initiation-Response-Evaluation style of discourse, which conflicts with their endorsement of a more conversational approach to language instruction.

The structure of the four primary chapters, with the discussion being systematically organized by the eight instructional conversation moves, offers a level of consistency when comparing the affordances of each unique environment. However, this

separation of online environments seems to create unnecessary divisions, particularly considering that the realization of instructional moves within them remains relatively similar. This division also contributes to the repetitive nature of content throughout the book as each of these four main chapters follows the same sequence, including frequent references to descriptions and definitions offered in preceding chapters.

Perhaps the most disconcerting element of this volume directly affecting its credibility is the lack of citations when Meskill and Anthony make claims that are purportedly based in the literature. The most alarming example comes in the summary of Chapter 7 on the written asynchronous environment where they state, “we have a solid body of evidence that supports positive learning outcomes when these are used in pedagogically sound ways.” (p.199) If citations and further discussion were included regarding how such pedagogically sound practices—perhaps even those outlined in the eight instructional conversation moves—have actually facilitated said learning outcomes, this would have ensured the validity of this assertion. The omission of citations for other similar claims throughout the book lessens the significance of its contribution to the field. Meskill and Anthony astutely concede that the effectiveness of any online tools or techniques ultimately depends on the ability of the teacher to implement them effectively in practice. To that end, they adequately portray the advantages of each online learning environment, providing language educators with an awareness of how best to leverage the affordances of each environment for the benefit of student learning. However, some of the unfavourable aspects addressed above detract from the otherwise practical approach of the book and the thoughtful insights that it offers those teaching in online environments.