

Review of *Teaching language and teaching literature in virtual environments*

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Teaching language and teaching literature in virtual environments

Carrió-Pastor, M. L. (Ed.)

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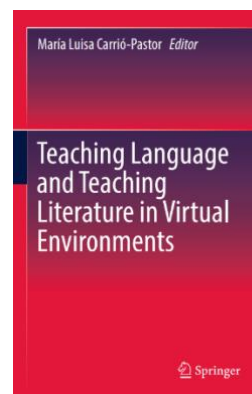
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The integration of virtual environments in educational contexts has received growing attention in the last decade (Freina & Ott, 2015). In the domain of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), virtual environments have been used for numerous purposes and more recently, researchers have started exploring how virtual worlds and game-based virtual environments can be used in teaching practices and how they may contribute to language learning processes (e.g., Blyth, 2018; Carrió-Pastor, 2015; Shih & Yang, 2008). Central to this increasing interest in virtual educational environments is the shift from viewing the computer as a tool to seeing it as a space where learners can collaborate and interact with each other as well as with speakers of the target language (Schwienhorst, 2002). The book *Teaching Language and Teaching Literature in Virtual Environments* aims at providing diverse perspectives on teaching and learning with technology through the discussion of methodology design, technology tools, and empirical studies addressing the use of virtual environments for teaching languages and literature. The book is comprised of 15 chapters and it is divided into four parts. While the first three parts focus on virtual environments for language teaching, the last part of the book is centered on literary education. Carrió-Pastor emphasizes that language teaching with technology requires teachers to be continuously up to date with the tools that can enhance and improve educational contexts. The author also highlights that language learners' needs should be considered by both teachers and researchers so that meaningful and innovative teaching practices and learning activities can be developed.

Part 1 includes five chapters dedicated to methodology design for language teaching in virtual environments. In Chapter 1, del Carmen Horno-Chéliz and Sarasa-Cabezuelo discuss how information and communication technologies can help in teaching and learning vocabulary, using The Parasitic Model of second language vocabulary acquisition as the theoretical framework, and by taking into consideration second language teachers' views. The authors propose using computer tools (e.g., online flashcards, online dictionaries) to facilitate the memorization of vocabulary.

Chapter 2 presents new online activities and digital tools to practice oral skills in foreign language instructional contexts. More specifically, the author focuses on the use of SoundCloud, an audio-based social network, in a beginner Italian course to bring students' attention to their oral performances and to teacher's feedback. Data collected through a questionnaire show that students enjoyed taking part in oral activities and, despite not being digital natives, they did not find substantial technical challenges. This chapter is particularly useful to those who are interested in using virtual environments to support speaking skills. Chapter 3, titled "Language Learning in the Virtual Wild," describes the characteristics of informal online language learning in relation to the usage-based linguistics framework. The authors argue that more research on unstructured learning in virtual environments is necessary to further explore aspects of learner autonomy and language proficiency. The next chapter provides recommendations for the design and use of augmented reality and virtual reality technologies in the language classroom. The authors describe the use of mobile applications (e.g., Aurasma, Google Street) and web-based platforms (e.g., ThingLink) with Spanish language learners to acquire vocabulary and grammar related to abstract topics (e.g., environment and history). This chapter offers some practical guidelines for language teachers eager to experiment with augmented and virtual reality technologies. Chapter 5 examines the efficacy and best practices regarding Talk Abroad, a video-based synchronous computer mediated communication tool, in an intermediate foreign language course. Overall, students demonstrated increased autonomy as well as better performance thanks to the technology tool, the in-class discussions, and the guided reflections.

Part 2 comprises four chapters and focuses on tools for second and foreign language teaching in virtual environments. Chapter 6 describes the potential and limitations of Skype for the teaching of languages from the perspective of Serbian English teachers. All in all, results show that Skype has great potential, but it remains unexplored in terms of how it can be used beyond speaking skills, for example to practice writing in the target language. Chapter 7 looks at how FrameNet, an online repository of encyclopedic entries, can be used in a Spanish course to teach vocabulary, grammar, and metaphors. The author explains that both teachers and students can use FrameNet to create technology-enhanced materials and to explore word definitions and linguistic examples for self-learning. In chapter 8, a telecollaboration experience between English students learning Spanish and Spanish students learning English, in higher-education contexts, is described. In this study, participants used online communication tools and, based on the results of a self-assessment, they developed cross-cultural competence through virtual interactions. Chapter 9 is the last chapter of part 2 and it describes, analyzes, and compares two online videoconferencing initiatives integrated into collegiate Spanish courses in the United States. With this chapter, Echevarría aims at helping language educators make informed decisions when they choose to integrate technology tools in instructional contexts. The author concludes by stating that technology affords educators multiple ways of engaging learners in productive conversational activities; however, it is important to consider the element of practicality to maximize benefits and efforts devoted to designing and implementing technology-based activities in foreign language courses.

Part 3 is made up of three chapters and discusses specific second language teaching in virtual environments. In chapter 10, Losey-León and Balderas advocate for the use of a spaced repetition system in CALL from a cognitive approach, for personalized language learning. In their study, they explore the impact of spaced repetition learning on an undergraduate-level group of Spanish students of Maritime Navigation and Transport. Chapter 11 discusses challenges in relation to planning, preparing, and implementing a blended learning course in teacher training for Content and Language Integrated Learning. Findings from teacher trainers and teacher trainees' views

provide an in-depth understanding of challenges arising from using a blended model in peer training. Chapter 12, titled “Project-Based Learning in a Virtual Classroom: The Case of English for Tourism Communication,” describes how project-based learning has been implemented in an online third-year English course, which is part of a program offering a certificate in tourism at a higher education institution. In this study, participants designed a business plan for a hotel through step-by-step activities. At the end of the project, participants were interviewed about their experience and data show that, through their digital projects, students developed linguistic and thematic knowledge about the field of tourism.

Finally, part 4 highlights studies addressing literature teaching in virtual environments and it includes the last three chapters of the book. In chapter 13, the authors discuss how digital storytelling can be used to develop basic competencies, creativity, and multimodal literacy. According to the authors, a methodological option for training readers is the use of the book trailer, a tool for promoting a book in video format, distributed through social media. In their study, Ibarra-Rius and Ballester-Roca explain that participants created a book trailer for children or young adult books which enabled teachers to integrate information and communication technologies into the classroom, and to generate production practices closer to the context of students. Chapter 14 highlights various online activities planned with the Moodle platform and aimed at enhancing students’ understanding of the poetic genre. The authors call this project “Once upon My Songs,” which was specifically created after recognizing the difficulties that the poetic genre poses to university students. Part of this project are activities planned with different tools of the Moodle platform, which included reading online, listening to the songs, recording voices, etc. Finally, the last chapter describes the pedagogical impact, effectiveness, and viability of using blogs to support student learning and peer collaboration in a French literature course. In this context, the use of blogs aimed to foster students’ reflections and a critical approach to a literary novel. The authors particularly emphasize the collaborative nature of learning in the virtual environments and stress the importance of creating online discussions through students’ blog comments to make the task more meaningful and authentic.

This book offers some interesting insights on how various technology tools can be used for teaching and learning second and foreign languages and literature. The chapters present innovative ways of using technology and educators will find concrete examples of how such technologies can be integrated into their own pedagogical practices. Several studies present preliminary results, pointing to the need for further exploration of the place of technology tools in long-term course implementation. Although initial results are valuable, it is important to investigate students’ gains and limitations beyond pilot uses of technology. Teaching literature through virtual environments is only addressed in the final part of the book, thus more work needs to be accomplished in this specific area, perhaps by investigating literature and language together. All in all, this book is a valuable contribution to the field of CALL by presenting detailed empirical studies. This book is well-suited for researchers and teachers interested in experimenting with a variety of CALL tools for several purposes and in different contexts.

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About the author

Margherita Berti is a Ph.D. Candidate in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching at the University of Arizona. Her research resides at the intersection of culture teaching and educational technology. For her dissertation, she is exploring how collegiate foreign language educators may develop critical transcultural competence practices through the use virtual reality-based teaching materials.

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