

REVIEW OF LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE ESL AND L2 COMPUTER CLASSROOM

Language Learning Online: Theory and Practice in the ESL and L2 Computer Classroom

Janet Swaffar, Susan Romano, Philip Markley, & Katherine Arens (Eds.)

1998

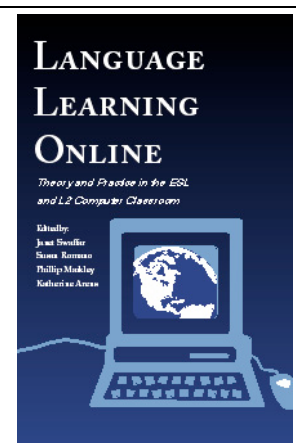
ISBN 1-891430-11-4

US \$29.00 (paperback); US \$9.00 (PDF printable, searchable);

Free (PDF read-only)

200 pp.

Labyrinth Publications
Austin, TX, USA



Reviewed by József Horváth, Janus Pannonius University

OVERVIEW

The communicative potential of networked language classes has recently become the focus of much scholarly attention (e.g., see Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997). Learning strategies and outcomes have been investigated and curricula developed in a number of countries in response to empirical research showing the benefits of networking (Horváth, 1994; Ortega, 1997). *Language Learning Online* not only presents the findings of this research, hypothesizing that networks contribute a unique element to learning and teaching, but also identifies areas of future research. The collection (available in [Adobe Acrobat PDF](#) format at <http://labyrinth.daedalus.com/LLO>) includes studies conducted at the University of Texas at Austin where the dedicated software package [Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment](#) (DIWE) was applied. DIWE is a suite of applications developed primarily for computer-assisted classroom discussion (CACD) and writing.

DESCRIPTION

Divided into four sections, the nine papers address issues arising in the spoken and written communication of ESL and L2 students. After the introduction, the first chapter ("The Computer Writing and Research Lab" by John Slatin) provides a historical account of DIWE, discussing the problems of funding and the underlying principles of the use of the computer writing and research lab.

The second section presents three case studies, each investigating an aspect of writing instruction. The paper by Nancy Sullivan ("Developing Critical Reading and Writing Skills") focuses on the communicative needs and performance of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Anglo-Americans. It argues that by using the network facility to empower minority students, participants in the class were stimulated to explore topics by themselves. The second paper in the section ("Using Computer-Assisted Class Discussions" by Dorothy M. Chun) reports on how interactive competence was enhanced by networking, including a typology of utterances produced via CACD over a two-semester period. The last paper in the section ("Empowering Students") zooms in on the learner-centered nature of CACD. Analyzing the volume of language output, Philip Markley suggests that such contexts facilitated Asian students' willingness to participate in discussions.

Data collected for the case studies include authentic e-mail message corpora, questionnaires, classroom observations, and student logs. As the number of students participating in the projects was limited, information on statistical significance and validity is not provided.

In the third section, the papers deal specifically with the students' evaluation of their learning. Margaret Healy Beauvois ("E-Talk: Computer-Assisted Classroom Discussion") found that students appreciated the fact that they (a) could take time to think of what to say, (b) were under much less stress than in a traditional classroom, and (c) were involved in a process of discussion that enabled them to improve language accuracy. In the other paper in this section ("Learners' and Instructors' Attitudes"), Christophe Jaeglin compares, on the basis of interviews and an in-house questionnaire, learners' and instructors' attitudes to networked class discussions. He reports that even though students regarded the facility as positive, some tutors were concerned about the problems caused by the technology.

The last section is devoted to classroom procedures with CACD applications. Orlando R. Kelm lists and describes a few e-mail applications ("The Use of Electronic Mail in Foreign Language Classes"), and concludes that further non-technocentric research should investigate the actual learning outcomes of these tasks. Janet Swaffar ("Assessing Development in Writing: A Proposal for Strategy Coding") synthesizes discourse and strategy theory and provides a coding system to diagnose the content, quantity, morphosyntax, and the concepts of students' scripts.

The volume closes with Swaffar's notes on what research areas should be explored in more detail: these include the linguistic, cultural, motivational, and cognitive features of spoken and written communication. Swaffar points out the research dilemma that because networking involves variables that are hard to control, such as group dynamics, class management, and technical issues, new designs should be sought. Another call is made for longitudinal investigations.

EVALUATION

In the second section I would like to have seen more triangulation in the studies. For example, although session transcripts provide the reader with insight into how individual students performed on the tasks, more emphasis could have been given to participant observation. Another shortcoming of this section is that the authors never say explicitly how the students' contributions to sessions were procured for this volume: no acknowledgment is to be found. Nevertheless, these papers will be useful for faculty and staff, especially in the U.S. where similar projects have already been developed: the themes, classroom procedures, and feedback types discussed may be trialled and adopted elsewhere.

In addition to Swaffar's recommendations for future research, I would also be interested in learning more about the lexical and pragmatic traits of networking students' offline and online scripts. Ethnographic research design could also supplement the investigation of how networked discussion may enable ESL and other L2 students to participate effectively in their respective future discourse communities.

SUMMARY

Synthesizing relevant theory and identifying pedagogical implications, *Language Learning Online* is a useful contribution to the field of computer-assisted language learning. It reports on the findings of current research and documents how classroom applications have informed institution-wide projects. The language of the papers is at times a little taxing, however, with all the abbreviations that have mushroomed in much of the literature. (On page 57 alone, for example, there are seven different acronyms: AI, LAN, ESL, CALL, CMC, CLP, and CACD.) But the volume achieves its aim, identified in Janet Swaffar's Introduction: to give an overview of "representative work on networking classes" (p. 14), and thus generate future research.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

József Horváth teaches undergraduate and graduate writing courses at Janus Pannonius University in Pécs, Hungary. He has experience in using groupware applications, such as GroupSystem, in Hungarian university language education. He has served as co-editor of *novELTy*, an English language teaching and cultural studies journal in Hungary.

E-mail: joe@btk.jpte.hu

REFERENCES

- Horváth, J. (1994). Electronic penpal projects: A TESL-L experience. In J. Kohn & D. Wolff (Eds.), *New methodologies in foreign language learning and teaching* (pp. 182-185). Szombathely, Hungary: Berzsenyi Dániel Tanárképző Főiskola.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with network computers: Effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *Modern Language Journal*, 79, 457-476.
- Ortega, L. (1997). Processes and outcomes in networked classroom interaction: Defining the research agenda for L2 computer-assisted classroom discussion. *Language Learning & Technology*, 1 (1) 82-93. Retrieved November 22, 1998 from the World Wide Web: <http://polyglot.cal.msu.edu/llt/vol1num1/ortega/default.html>.
- Warschauer, M. (1997). Computer-mediated collaborative learning: Theory and practice. *Modern Language Journal*, 81, 470-481.