Technology-mediated Learning Environments for Young English Learners
(Book Review)

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Textbook Details:
Technology-mediated Learning Environments for Young English Learners
Connections in and Out of School
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ISBN: 978-0-8058-6233-1
Publisher: Routledge
Pages: 336

In 1980 I published a paper in the NALLD Journal on how computer-based learning activities could be integrated into the modern language lab (Kenner and Richards, 1980). My co-author and I thought we were pretty avant-garde having collected several computer programs and installed a couple of terminals in the university’s language lab. One of the terminals was actually an Apple II microcomputer and we had figured out a way to store its programs on the mainframe and download them from a menu as local hard drives were not yet available. The computer corner quickly became far more popular than the rows of listen and repeat cassette stations and we congratulated ourselves in the constant chatter of foreign students who clustered there. One day we discovered most were Computer Science students who had figured out a way to bypass our English language tutorials and access the mainframe to do their homework instead of queuing up in the science lab. Parker’s book of collected chapters helps put that early experience into perspective. Technology is important not just because of intended teachings, but because it can become a focal point for student interaction, a gateway to new worlds of information and a fulcrum for socially constructed learning.

Over the past 30 years I never ceased to be amazed by the clever offerings of technology, and how they have so little impact on intentional school-based learning yet so much impact on everything else we do. Years of research into teaching programs have generated good teaching algorithms, particularly for the acquisition of vocabulary and practicing grammar, but seldom has this penetrated the primary school classroom. At first we thought, “if only we had graphics”, and then “we need an installed base” of machines to create a market. Well, now schools have the computers (with graphics) and they are connected to a vast internet of resources, but other than typing assignments, doing web searches and making audio-visual presentations we don’t often reap rewards from the technology seeds sown. And for learners of second languages (or even for learners of first languages) we seem to be light years away from harnessing the potential benefits. Parker and her co-authors seem to share this perspective. Language learning has not enjoyed a return on technology investment. Their book examines the many social, and technical issues that need be addressed, and supplies a refreshing number of examples of projects where technology appears to have been used with positive results for young second language learners. A feature of the book that I enjoyed was that each main perspective was followed by a critical reflection by another contributor.

The context for this book is an emerging and pressing social need in the United States. The melting pot where minorities quickly shed their cultural identities and blended into the social fabric within one or two generations is being rapidly transformed into a new multicultural society. By 2030 an estimated 40% of the K-12 school population will be second language learners. The largest and most rapidly expanding language group is Hispanic, but other immigrant populations are also establishing linguistic beachheads in the USA. On the one hand, multiculturalism in an era of international trade should enrich the society, but on the other, a public school system dominated by a unilingual white Anglo-Saxon culture is ill equipped to cope with the demands of a swelling population of second-language learners. As second-language children struggle to simultaneously learn academic English and course
content, many fall farther and farther behind the achievement norms established for the dominant linguistic group. Allington and Cunningham (2002) noted the same pattern for poor readers, those who are behind at the start of school fall further and further behind each year. The growing gap spirals into social and economic disparity. The same fear may also apply to the new technology literacy – the ability to seek, sort and re-use information from the internet. The digital linguistic divide is exacerbated by the current predominance of resources in English.

Just as technology is evolving, so is our understanding of how children learn language. Basically, there is only so much one can do with low-level vocabulary and grammar drills. Indeed, in one chapter Carla Meskill points out that young children do not benefit from meta-linguistic approaches that might appeal to adults with well-developed language schemas. Language is socially constructed and is learned best from those with whom the child interacts in what Vygotsky would have called their “zone of proximal development”. Children have a natural ability to learn languages, and language has meaning when it is used to further the child’s own purposes. School English is different from the English of causal daily intercourse – it is a rich vocabulary and a set of cultural formalities of composition, methods for critical thinking and algorithms for test taking. For child whose “proximal zone” at home and on the street contains no English, there may be few opportunities for preparation for the language used in school.

It is impractical to summarize all the perspectives brought together in this volume, so let me highlight a few key chapters:

Jim Cummins provides a stimulating chapter on technology, literacy and young learners. He describes three nested pedagogical orientations: transmission, social constructivist and transformative. He points out that one cannot expect technology to stimulate constructive dialogue in schools if such practices are not already present in the classroom. He goes on to provide a set of design criteria extracted from analysis of case studies where technology seems to make a difference. Olga Vsquez follows with a wonderful rebuttal, closely examining Cummins criteria (she calls them his “Rules of Engagement”) and notes they too lack empirical validation. For her, the real problem is that schools are “intractably resistant to change” and thus a solution to the lack of progress in the schools is to foster change in the community. She goes on to describe La Classe Magica - a community based technology program that has 17 years of effective results.

Jill Castek leads a strong contribution “Developing new literacies among multilingual learners” and cites Coiro et al that “The Internet is today’s defining technology for literacy and learning.” No matter how you define “new literacies”:
1. They are here and are central to participation in today’s globalized community,
2. They are “deictic” and the rapid change in technology brings rapidly changing perspectives, and
3. They are multifaceted and require analysis from several points of view.

She notes that new literacies have also inverted the power relationship in education – when it comes to technology they young people are often “more literate than their teachers”. In short, if teachers become guides on the side, if schools would see multilingualism as a strength rather than a problem and if technology was welcomed as an opportunity to create change, then there is hope at the bottom of the digital box.

Several of the chapters provide overviews and examples of the ways in which Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are used with young English Language Learners. These are interesting, not just in terms of providing a catalogue of useful ideas, but also in reminding us of the lack of coordination of the effort in this area.

The key impressions I brought away from my reading are:
1. ICT can help young language learners accelerate their learning of a second language, but to be really effective it has to go beyond drills for phonetic awareness, vocabulary acquisition and grammar to become a fulcrum for social constructive learning. It is not learning from the computer, but learning through the computer that is likely to improve English comprehension.
2. ICT approaches can and should reinforce and build on first language skills. By helping to reinforce each child’s cultural identity and the value of multiculturalism, ICT can be transformative not just for young children but for society as a whole.
3. One of the strongest methods for technology to assist children in learning their second language is to create collaborative activities in which they interact with native English speakers in a meaningful way. In essence, this
expands the child’s proximal environment to include language models and experiences that may be missing in
their home or community.
4. ICT fails to have widespread language learning impact because the many interventions are scattered
geographically, isolated technologically and discontinuous in scope and range of curriculum. The time has come
for large-scale longitudinal approaches involving TV, internet, games, print and social networking.
5. ICTs cannot be ignored because they are already highly integrated into our society and constitute the *de facto*
new literacy. Schools that will not adapt deserve to be by-passed. Adaptation requires more than an infusion of
technology – it requires extensive and on-going professional development in technological skills, in learning
new socio-constructive pedagogical approaches and a sensitivity to help young learners build on their first
language skills. It also requires a change in political will to recognize and value a multilingual approach that will
reflect the future make-up of American society.

Of course, much of what is said about ICT and language might also be applied to other subject matter areas in
school. While I don’t disagree that solid language skills are fundamental to school success, the same lack of
comprehensive planning to lever ICT to accelerate learning and remediation is also found in subjects such as math,
social studies and science. The school system is ultra conservative and the overselling of technology in the past has
left a bitter legacy of highly expensive computers and little impact in terms of academic achievement.

Technology-mediated Learning Environments for Young English Learners is not a recipe book for success. It is a
collection of perspectives that may help re-define the start line for initiatives in the use of technology by young
language learners. This language challenge is not only an American issue. It exists wherever education is offered in a
language other than one with which the child is comfortable. While some children thrive and become natural
polyglots, others struggle to keep up with the dual demands of learning the content and learning the language at the
same time. They fall further and further behind and often drop out. In my Canadian experience with minority
language francophone children, those who are uncomfortable in the language of instruction can fall into the safety
net of the neighbourhood English school. But seldom is there such a safety net in the USA. Perhaps, innovators and
policy makers who read Parker’s collection, might weave one with technology.

**References**

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