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Introduction

Our work as language teachers and researchers in online settings has, over the last decade, led us continually to scrutinise the field of computer-assisted language learning. However, the topic crystallised in our minds and became a plan for a book when we discovered by chance that we had each been engaged in some language learning of our own. One of us, a native speaker of German, wanted to improve her Spanish; the other, a native speaker of French, was interested in developing her Italian. We had both decided that individual learning would be the most convenient option, and we each sought a tandem partner, a Spaniard and an Italian, with an interest in improving their German and their French, respectively. But whilst one of us found her partner in the physical surroundings of the university campus and instigated tandem learning sessions in the coffee lounge, the other met her partner on a website and went on to organise sessions through Internet telephony.

When we discovered that we had had this parallel experience, we were keen to make comparisons. Did each of us feel that she had made progress in the chosen language? Yes, but self-study between sessions was a major contributor to the learning gains in both the coffee lounge and the Internet-based settings. Had the experience been pleasurable and motivating for each pair? Yes, but the atmosphere in the campus-based partnership was different from that which was created by the cyber-tandem, for whom the technology itself took the place of coffee in establishing a common ground on which to build the learning-teaching relationship. The fact that one pair used electronic technology and not the other seemed to have made little difference to the first question. However, it created two interestingly contrasting answers to the second one.

In that discussion of our experience as learners, the need to understand better the diverse ways in which technology affects learning came

to the fore. This need, with which our practice as teachers and researchers had already acquainted us, was once again a live issue. It is therefore from the triple perspective of teacher, researcher and learner that we offer our reflections in this book about communication in online learning, online teaching and research on online language education.

Communication is the central concept of this book. We examine theories, pedagogies and tools that in one way or another facilitate communication. Chun (2007) suggests that 'communication' used in the phrase 'computer-assisted communication' (CMC) receives the most coverage of all topic categories in her overview of recent research, based on evidence from two major US journals on technology-mediated language learning. CMC also comes top of a list of 'hits' tracked by one of the two journals in Chun's corpus. However, she adds two caveats to this apparent domination of the field. First, the acronym CMC can be used loosely to refer to a form of technology (rather than a form of communication), in which case articles categorised as 'about CMC' sometimes cover learning activities that are not communicative. Second, she notes that her sample is limited to two journals, each of which has recently devoted special issues to CMC, creating a bias in her figures.

As we show in chapter 1, such figures require further scrutiny. For example, the likelihood is that the majority of contributors to (and possibly readers of) these two journals are from the side of the digital divide where tools for CMC are becoming routine household and study items. Nevertheless, Chun is right to put the spotlight on communication, and in this book we set out to illuminate a wide range of aspects of communication in online language learning.

Part I is devoted to a discussion of the major concepts that underpin the field of computer-mediated communication for language learning. In chapter 1 we trace the origins of the field, show how it has been conceptualised and what has been expected of it over the three decades of its existence, particularly in respect of its relationship with computer-assisted language learning (CALL). In chapter 2 we identify the two major theoretical frameworks that have informed the work of our community – cognitivist second language acquisition (SLA) theory and socioculturalism – highlighting not only their influence on the technology-mediated practices in the field, but also the ways in which technology-mediated practices have been the instruments for a continuous critical reappraisal of their respective principles. In chapter 3 we come to three core concepts of education that have found a new expression and a

central role in technology-enhanced learning: mediation, literacy and the affordances of technologised learning situations. Chapter 4 examines the methods used in research on computer-mediated communication for language learning, drawing out their specific advantages (or in some cases their disadvantages) for researchers in the field. In chapter 5 we turn to online pedagogies and teaching skills, showing how both types of know-how are shaped by our profession's increasing understanding of the conditions that prevail in the electronic media. Chapter 6 looks at learners and the quality of their experience, which may be facilitated or inhibited by the technological setting. In this chapter we also present ideas and questions about the role and transformations of learners' identities online currently emerging in the field. The final chapter in Part I, chapter 7, examines the assessment of online language learning in communicative settings.

Part II documents teaching, learning and research through different technologies in order to frame these examples within an overarching question about the functioning of the cycle of practice and research. By examining asynchronous fora (chapter 8), synchronous chat systems (chapter 9), multiple object-oriented environments (chapter 10), audio-graphic environments and virtual worlds (chapter 11), videoconferencing (chapter 12) and emerging technologies such as blogs, wikis and mobile devices (chapter 13), we bring into focus the effective or dysfunctional relationship between practice and research in our field.

In Part III we address readers interested in carrying out small-scale research on language teaching or learning in computer-mediated settings. Chapter 14 presents a picture of 'the small-scale research project' in three case studies, and offers an overview of methods and tools of relevance to such projects. In chapter 15 we turn more specifically to issues relating to researching human participants' online behaviour from the point of view of skills and of ethics. Chapter 16 addresses the methodological and practical requirements that the collection and management of electronic data place on those organising the small-scale research projects. Finally, chapter 17 suggests some practical research projects.

In Part IV, chapter 18 offers resources, mainly web-based, for readers wanting to research further the topics covered in the book.

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