

## REVIEW OF *NETWORK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: CONCEPTS AND PRACTICE*

Network-Based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice

Mark Warschauer & Richard Kern, Editors

Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series

Michael H. Long & Jack C. Richards, Series Editors

2000

ISBN 0-521-66742-9

\$25.00US

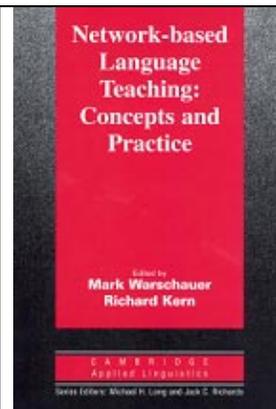
240 pp.

Cambridge University Press

110 Midland Avenue

Port Chester, NY 10573-4930

<http://uk.cambridge.org/>



**Reviewed by Marisol Fernández-García, Northeastern University**

*Network-Based Language Teaching: Theory and Practice* is an edited volume that collects a group of descriptive and empirical studies on network-based language teaching (NBLT) in a variety of second and foreign language learning contexts. As the editors, Warschauer and Kern, point out in the preface, these studies document and illustrate the type of processes and outcomes that take place when language learners use computer networks in particular circumstances. Those interested in designing and implementing NBLT will undoubtedly find helpful the implications that the results of these studies may have for their own teaching context.

In chapter 1 ("Introduction: Theory and Practice of Network-Based Language Teaching"), Richard Kern and Mark Warschauer define NBLT as "language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks" (p. 1). As such, NBLT represents a new and different form of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). On the one hand, communication is at the core of NBLT; on the other, NBLT breaks with the time and space constraints imposed by face-to-face communication and by traditional language learning tools, thus allowing for multiple forms of learning, communicative practice, and collaboration. Despite the apparent new possibilities that this new medium affords, Kern and Warschauer caution that the specific advantages of NBLT can only be unveiled by research that examines "particular *practices of use* in particular contexts" (p. 2).

Kern and Warschauer devote part of this chapter to situating the emergence of NBLT in a historical context by first considering the shift in theoretical perspectives in the recent history of language teaching, and then, how those perspectives have influenced the use of computer technology in language teaching. The last section of the chapter outlines the research implications for various CALL approaches and identifies the areas of NBLT research that have been neglected to date and that are addressed by the contributions of the volume.

Chapter 2 ("Sociocollaborative Language Learning in Bulgaria"), by Carla Meskill and Krassimira Ranglova, offers a detailed account of the redesign of an English as a foreign language curriculum (EFL) at the University of Sofia, Bulgaria. The authors argue that the redesign of the curriculum was based on current sociocognitive theory and practice and involved a major shift away from a curriculum that emphasized teacher-centered and language appreciation activities to one that is student- and meaning-centered. The authors provide a discussion of the rationale for the adoption of a response-based approach

to the teaching of literature and explain and illustrate how technology was integrated into the social context of learning and the literature-based curriculum. Finally, they discuss the formative and summative assessment based on data collected during the yearlong period of implementation. Among the many positive aspects the data revealed, Meskill and Ranglova highlight the role of technologies "in bringing about new ways of using and thinking about language, especially in terms of student autonomy, student-student collaboration, and teacher participation" (p. 35).

In chapter 3 ("On-Line Learning in Second Language Classrooms: An Ethnographic Study"), Mark Warschauer reports on a two-year study of the implementation of on-line learning in four college language and writing classes in Hawaii. Following an ethnographic approach, Warschauer shows how the particular sociocultural context affects the implementation and contributes to the relative success of NBLT. In particular, his findings indicate that the general institutional context and the beliefs of individual teachers influenced the implementation of new technologies. Students, on the other hand, experienced the use of technologies as a medium to develop new literacy skills of great importance in their lives. Warschauer's careful analysis suggests that, in the context of his study, for electronic learning activities to be most purposeful and effective, they should be learner-centered, authentic, and rhetorically appropriate; have goals that are relevant for students' lives; and allow students to explore and express their social and cultural identity.

In the fourth chapter ("Negotiation in Cyberspace: The Role of Chatting in the Development of Grammatical Competence"), Jill Pelletieri reports on a study that investigated the potential of network-based communication "to foster the negotiation of meaning and form-focused interaction" (p. 64). Using Varonis and Gass' (1985) model for nonnative-nonnative speaker negotiation, Pelletieri presents a descriptive analysis of the discourse generated by second language learners of Spanish while carrying tasks through network-based synchronous written interaction. In line with studies that examined oral interactions, Pelletieri found that lexical and content negotiations predominated over morphosyntactic ones. Only those tasks that included a more form-focused subcomponent (e.g., the composition of an on-line note or narrative) tended to generate higher percentages of morphosyntactic negotiations. Her study also indicated that learners' output modifications in response to negotiations and corrective feedback resulted in more target-like forms and in high rates of incorporation of feedback into subsequent turns. The study points to a number of interesting venues for future research relating to how specific features of task design may have an impact on the amount of negotiation or on learners' focus on grammatical form.

The fifth contribution to the volume ("Writing into Change: Style Shifting in Asynchronous Electronic Discourse"), by Boyd Davis and Ralf Thiede, examines style-shifting patterns in the texts generated by English as foreign language (EFL) students in two asynchronous conferences during a semester-long course. An analysis of the discourse and of the syntactic and lexical profiles in two of the EFL students' postings suggested "consciously motivated choices of style, of lexicosyntactic accommodation, and of linguistic awareness" (p. 112), particularly in response to native-speaker texts. The authors also identified signals of social practice that reflected status and distance and that seemed to support Wolfson's (1989) "bulge hypothesis," that is, "that minimum or ... maximum, degrees of status and social distance ... foster very similar patterns as opposed to the greater variation in the middle section" (p. 113). Davis and Thiede base most of their claims on qualitative analyses of some EFL students' texts, as well as self-reports, and a series of quantitative measures. The rationale for the use of the latter is not specifically addressed, and the reader could benefit from a brief account of its appropriateness for their particular research design.

In chapter 6 ("Computers and Collaborative Writing in the Foreign Language Curriculum"), Jean Marie Schultz reports on an experimental study that compared the effects of computer-based and face-to-face oral peer editing feedback on intermediate-level French students' compositions. Schultz's analyses yielded a positive effect for oral feedback on the revisions of compositions of third-semester students in terms of number and length of content changes. Similar results were obtained in the case of fourth-semester students; however, the compositions of students that had participated in an alternate mode of feedback

(computer and oral) were superior to either pure mode in terms of stylistic and interpretative-level content changes made. The results of Schultz's study challenge previous claims about the efficiency of computer use to foster improvement in certain areas of writing. On the other hand, her results suggest the need for research that looks into the different cognitive processes involved in oral and computer-mediated feedback and how they may interact to facilitate improvements in writing development.

In chapter 7 ("Networked Multimedia Environments for Second Language Acquisition"), Dorothy M. Chun and Jan L. Plass discuss key issues involved in the design of networked multimedia environments that are based on principles of second language acquisition. Consonant with current constructivist approaches to learning, Chun and Plass conceive multimedia programs as environments that can enhance the "learning-as-knowledge-construction process" (p. 161) and engage learners in higher-level cognitive processes. The authors present a description of a prototype project under development for second-year German students that illustrates how the tools incorporated were implemented in a constructivist environment. Among the factors that the authors underscore as in need of investigation, is the potential cognitive overload of navigating in a hypermedia environment. The chapter concludes with specific suggestions for future research on the cognitive processes involved in learning with hypermedia materials. The authors point out that this type of research is crucial to determine which and how features of hypermedia environments can aid in the process of language acquisition.

In chapter 8 ("An Electronic Literacy Approach to Network-Based Language Teaching"), Heidi Shetzer and Mark Warschauer present a theoretical framework for the development of electronic literacy. Shetzer and Warschauer argue that, in an ever increasing technological society, an electronic literacy approach to NBLT implies two pedagogical objectives: "how to use information technology in order to teach language" and "how to teach language so that learners can make effective use of information technology" (p. 172). Shetzer and Warschauer examine first the three main areas that the development of electronic literacy skills encompasses (i.e., communication, construction, and research) and discuss how they differ from earlier approaches to language and literacy instruction. They then suggest skills and activities that allow for flexibility depending on the technologies available in a particular context. Finally, they propose action research, which involves collaboration among teachers, students, and researchers, as well as the use of the electronic medium, to investigate and reflect critically on specific electronic literacy practices.

In chapter 9 ("Task-Based Language Learning Via Audiovisual Networks: The LEVERAGE Project"), Christoph Zähler, Agnès Fauverge, and Jan Wong describe a pilot study on the use of broadband audio and audiovisual conferencing with college-level learners of French and of English. Drawing on the theoretical work of authors such as Frawley (1997), Neisser (1992), and Vygotsky (1978), the authors evaluate the system in an attempt to determine whether it was able to support intensive collaborative learning and effective zones of proximal development. They present data samples that reveal learners' use of metaconscious processing and intersubjectivity, as well as close collaboration in carrying out the tasks of the study. The analysis of the data also indicated the importance of shared work space in collaborative learning. Thus, in the case of network-based environments, the availability of a shared writing tool seemed to be essential to facilitate the externalization of ideas and to make them the subject for reflection and negotiation. Likewise, the authors found that the role of an adviser was crucial to help with language-related, task-related, and technical issues, and therefore, to maximize the potential benefits of audiovisual networking. In contrast with on-line written communication (Bump, 1990; Kern, 1995), this study suggests that particular limitations of audiovisual conferencing (e.g., restricted visual channel) forced learners to rely on oral feedback and seemed to have an inhibitory effect in learners' participation. This study indicates the potential of audiovisual networking as a promising tool for long-distance task-based learning. Nevertheless, clarification of how particular terms (e.g., "peer tutoring," "corrections," "negotiation of meaning," "misunderstandings") are used in the results section of the chapter is needed to properly interpret the implications of this type of learner-learner collaboration for language acquisition.

In chapter 10 ("Is Network-Based Learning CALL?"), Carol A. Chapelle argues that support for a distinction between CALL and NBLT must come from an empirically based definition of network and non-network CALL activities, including a description of learners' use of language and of the activity features that contribute to the significant aspects of learners' language use. Chapelle examines six recurrent themes in the history of CALL, and whether and how NBLT ties to and offers new perspectives on each theme: the need for CALL evaluation, the myth of "CALL method," significant features of activities, the need to link to SLA research, the classroom context of CALL, and sociocultural issues of CALL. She also addresses the critical role of NBLT in CALL's evolution and identifies some of the complexities of network learning activities that raise new challenges but also "push forward the scope of CALL use and evaluation" (p. 219). Chapelle concludes with a tentative answer to the title question: "NBLT represents an expansion rather than a reconceptualization of CALL" (p. 222).

This volume offers a very readable group of studies that not only clarify the nature of NBLT but also address, from a variety of perspectives, many of the complexities involved in its design and implementation. Most contributions present particular instances of use of NBLT, which illustrate the wide range of potential applications. In addition, significant venues for future research are identified throughout the book. The editors note that the book was "written for researchers, graduate students, and teachers who are interested in the theory and practice of network-based language teaching" (p. 2), and it certainly is an essential source for that type of readers. Nevertheless, the book may appeal as well to readers with a general interest in the use of computer-mediated communication in education.

---

## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Marisol Fernández-García is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Applied Linguistics in the Department of Modern Languages at Northeastern University. Her research interests are in psycholinguistics and input processing, interaction and negotiation in oral and computer-mediated communication, and foreign language teaching and assessment methods.

E-mail: [m.fernandez-garcia@neu.edu](mailto:m.fernandez-garcia@neu.edu)

## REFERENCES

- Bump, J. (1990). Radical changes in class discussion using networked computers. *Computers and the humanities*, 24(1-2), 49-65.
- Frawley, W. (1997). *Vygotsky and cognitive science: Language and the unification of the cognitive and social mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and quality of language production. *The Modern Language Journal*, 79, 457-476.
- Neisser, U. (1992). The development of consciousness and the acquisition of the self. In F. Kessel, P. Cole, & D. Johnson (Eds.), *Self and consciousness: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 1-18). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Varonis, E., & Gass, S. (1985). Non-native/non-native conversations: A model for negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(1), 71-90.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wolfson, N. (1989). The social dynamics of native and nonnative variation in complimenting behavior. In M. Eisenstein (Ed.), *The dynamic interlanguage: Empirical studies in second language variation* (pp. 219-236). New York: Plenum Press.