

A BOOK REVIEW ON ENGLISH LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this review is to describe the content of *English Learning in the Digital Age: Agency, Technology and Context* by Zeng (2018) and elaborate on its unique aspects. The book focuses on English learning in the digital age in a Chinese context. It aims to explore not only Chinese undergraduate students' use of online tools but also their lack of Web 2.0 technology use outside of class in learning English. It is a guide for English learners, teachers, EFL practitioners and academicians who want to enhance their theoretical and practical understandings in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) because chapter discussions offer best practices and inform the readers about what (not) to do in using Web 2.0 tools for language teaching and learning. In addition, it concentrates on the investigation of learners' experiences, rather than focusing on new technologies and their potentials waiting to be discovered in teaching and learning environments. It consists of eight chapters, and each chapter focuses on a different aspect of Zeng's research on English as a foreign language (EFL) and technology use in EFL. The book provides valuable insights and may be used as a guide by English learners, teachers, and EFL practitioners.

Key Words: English as a foreign language; computer assisted language learning (CALL); technology use; digital age

Focusing on the voices and behaviors of Chinese undergraduate students in relation to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), in this book, Zeng accumulates a range of different perspectives that also draw on his firsthand experiences both as an English learner and as a CALL practitioner in China. Although the setting first appears to be only locally significant, it would definitely be misleading to assume so for the reader. Indeed, this book is a great contribution for both academicians and practitioners who would like to enhance their theoretical and practical understandings in the field of CALL. Another strength of the book lies within its differing from its contemporaries in two major aspects. First, the book aims to explore not only Chinese undergraduate students' use of online tools but also their lack of Web 2.0 technology use outside of class in learning English. Second, it concentrates on the investigation of the experiences of learners, rather than focusing on new technologies and their potentials waiting to be discovered in teaching and learning environments.

The organization of the book is made easy and clear to follow by the author, as he provides clear-cut and smooth transitions within the eight chapters. Understanding the content in each chapter is facilitated through the presentation of an abstract at the beginning of each chapter. In addition, applications of figures and illustrations are provided for concepts such as theoretical frameworks and presentations of the data results from research studies. Also, the conclusion parts in each chapter serve as a review and clarification of the essence of that chapter. The references provided at the end of each chapter serve as a useful tool for further reading. Throughout the book, the author provides a balanced position regarding the benefits and drawbacks of Web 2.0 for language learning, which is another strength of the book.

Chapter 1 is an introduction by Zeng setting the framework of the book within CALL, and he continues with narrowing it down to the latest trend of CALL research, which is called Web Enhanced Language Learning (WELL). The author distinguishes the application of WELL as a subcategory of CALL and Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) as an alternative parallel to CALL. The author also touches upon the dilemma of to what extent CALL covers the usage of the latest technologies, specifically considering the rising interest in MALL. Therefore, he proposes the term TELL which stands for Technology Enhanced Language Learning so that it would be more feasible and possible to encompass a much broader scope. With regard to a number of definitions of CALL by various scholars, the author opts for CALL as “a

link to bridge past, present and future of research concerning technology and language learning” as his operational definition (p. 2). One of the most alluring aspects of this chapter for the reader can be found in his presentation of his firsthand experiences primarily as an EFL learner in China and then as a CALL practitioner for a few reasons. First, through the lens of having been an actual language learner, the author enables the reader to be in his shoes with regard to his personal (hi)story of technology and language learning. Through his own journey of encountering technology for learning, quite an interesting assumption is given by the author: the expectations of language professionals and CALL practitioners could be actually quite different from language learners’ experiences of using technology. Consequently, he courageously dares to question to what extent today’s learners are ‘tech-savvy’ or ‘digital’. Similarly, his own experience as a CALL practitioner in China could serve as ‘tips’ and ‘warnings’ for the reader in that technology may not magically yield to interactions and collaborations among learners. He, then, continues with providing information on the setting of the book (e.g., Chinese universities as the context for WELL, conditions for technology experiences, learning English in Chinese universities through figures and illustrations and exemplifications). All these descriptions help the reader to reach an interesting conclusion in that social norms and past educational experiences of tertiary level learners play an important role in their making sense of English learning opportunities that can be offered through Web technologies in this digital era. The author then skillfully connects the importance of this issue with his research interest, research questions, theoretical perspective and methodology.

In Chapter 2, the author revises discussions and arguments in the CALL field and educational technology. He also provides insights on the necessity and importance of examining language learners’ actual (non)use of Web technologies outside the classroom. The author skillfully fuses such concepts as the history and emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, their impact on the change of language learning, and the promises and drawbacks of these technologies for outside of class language learning in a coherent manner. Also, the rhetoric of *digital natives* is well presented through abundant descriptions of their labeling characteristics through arguments which are both in support of and to the detriment of this narrative.

In Chapter 3, the author provides three steps so as to conceptualize the behaviors of language learners around digital technology. He first

discusses a specific sociocultural framework for the study of technology (non)use by providing the basis, strengths and limitations of the framework in question after providing an overview of sociocultural theory. Second, he reviews key theories and practices regarding second language acquisition (SLA) reminding the readers of the various factors in the learning process with detailed explanations from the literature. Furthermore, he adapts an existing framework to constitute a conceptual understanding of technology use that is subject-specific. Thus, in turn, he brings up a more refined framework which, as highlighted by the author, is original in that it criticizes the oversimplified beliefs on Web 2.0 and learning by acknowledging the learners' needs and capacity in a specific L2 context.

Chapter 4 serves as the methodology section of Zeng's research study through elaborated explanations and visualizations, and it provides a full account of the research sites. One might think that although the title of the book uses the term Web 2.0, the research questions posed in Chapters 5-7 do not mention it (i.e., *Are Internet tools used by most of the participants for English learning-related purposes outside the classroom? If so, how are Internet tools mainly used? Does the use of online technology facilitate a different approach to learning English as a foreign language? How does such a use or lack of use relate to the wider context of language learning?*). In order to eliminate any misunderstanding or misconception, the author explains why he opts for using the term *online technologies* instead of the term Web 2.0 by providing reasons, which makes another strong and unique aspect of the book.

Throughout Chapters 5-8, the author reports and discusses the findings and the results of his study. Chapter 5 might be quite intriguing and surprising for readers with regard to the results and implications that turn out to be quite 'unexpected' considering the epithet attributed to today's learners. More 'food for thought' to gather from this chapter lies within learners' choice of Web 2.0 tools with regard to language learning.

In contrast to the learners discussed in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 pinpoints the actions of the participants with regard to the reasons of the use of technology, specifically WELL, and accordingly highlights the notion of "breaking away" with relation to the power of agency that was posited by Engeström (1996, p. 26). Chapter 6 also connects the reader to the stories and experiences of the learners who had different motives and reasons from the learners discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter is also thought-provoking in that it depicts a number of situations in which the

learners become empowered and take the role of ‘creators’ for their learning process.

Through the insights offered by the learners themselves, Chapter 7 serves as a springboard for the author for a detailed elaboration of the reasons (i.e., access and technical issues, IT and meta-cognitive skills, time, intentions towards the use of WELL, motives and beliefs regarding learning English, contextual discourses about English learning, existing learning patterns, cultural artifact of examination, and deficiency/ineffectiveness as a language learning tool) behind the limited ratification of Web 2.0 technologies and their communicative features by the learners. This chapter highlights the close linkage of learners’ resistance towards the use of WELL with their wider context of language learning which encompasses resources such as social, material and discursive resources that are available to the learners. The readers will find this chapter well-grounded in that the chapter may help them reflect on their past experiences as language learners in terms of their relationships with their teachers and evaluation or assessment of their learning outcomes. We particularly loved the analogy putting the traditional methods (e.g. buying mock examination papers, studying reference books or memorization of dictionaries) as though they were “old wine” into “new bottles” of activities that involve L2 activities (Zeng, 2018, p. 162).

As the last chapter, Chapter 8 revisits and summarizes the findings of the study, its focus being mainly on what the contribution of this book is to the field of CALL through challenging and problematizing the epithets such as *digital natives* or *learner 2.0* pertaining to learners and learning via Web 2.0 technologies. The book is significant also because of its adoption of the sociocultural approach with the emphasis on the concept of learner agency which was found influential with regard to (non)use of technology outside the classroom in addition to the contextual factors as mediational impact. Another key element that the book implies is that individual characteristics are not solely innate but are also shaped through the interactions of learners’ with the world around them. This chapter is also useful in that it enumerates a few *dos* and *don’ts* for the practical implementation of digital technologies in teaching/learning settings for the reader to contemplate.

As for suggestions for improvement, discussion questions could also have been added after each chapter for the reader so that they could do brainstorming on their own local educational and professional contexts. Also, because the study was conducted with participants from only two

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institutions at the tertiary level, findings and implications of the study are susceptible to skepticism of transferability to other contexts and levels such as K-12. Overall, this book offers a range of diverse perspectives and provides a wide variety of research-based examples for English learners, practitioners and teachers in the digital age. Thus, it is a great contribution to the language education field, especially in the era of COVID-19 in which educators have to make use of technology to continue teaching their subjects.

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