CHAPTER 1

THE IMPORTANCE AND CONTINUING TREND OF TECHNOLOGY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Technology in ESL/EFL and reasons for discarding it

Technology in language learning is often associated with outdated methods, which do not involve the learner enough. Communication is not thought of as interactive, or limiting a student to self-study and practice. However, learner independence is sometimes wrongly interpreted as non-involvement of teachers and peers. Current advances in technology demonstrate that a combination of distance learning, technology and existing methods of student-centered and independent learning create a valuable learning experience as an addition to or integration in a regular language course.

Often referred to as CALL, negative criticism of computer-assisted language learning, is often more frequently reported than any of its benefits. At least according to Freiermuth (2002), "computer-assisted instruction has struggled to legitimize itself as a viable force in language learning circles". Freiermuth states that the origins of most problems can be categorized into two categories:

The first is an issue of technology versus language development, and the second an issue of a deficiency in student interaction. Identifying technology versus language development as one of the key issues implies that in order to use CALL and computer mediated communication (CMC) for language learning purposes, one must be aware of the technological learning curve involved. However, it must be kept in mind that language learning is the ultimate purpose, so the technological learning curve must be proportionate to that purpose. Regarding the second origin of problems mentioned by Freiermuth; student interaction is useful, yet needs to be monitored and guided by a teacher in order to sustain a rich learning experience in which language learning opportunities arise. In Freiermuth's study (2002), the danger of students straying too far off topic is mentioned. This would result in fewer of such opportunities for students if a teacher would not instruct them to revert to their initial goals. The next sections will concern modern practices of CALL, one of which is a variant called tandem learning. Tandem learning can described as the act of two or more parties, who study each other's language establishing a language exchange. They are then engaged in a language tandem.

Emerging technologies

The current trend is moving away from self-access programs, in which students individually engage with a machine in some form of repetitive drill. These often only function as aids in sharpening retention or pronunciation skills. Current research aims to uncover new ways in which a computer can serve as a communicative medium rather than as merely a database. One reasonably familiar example is e-mail, basically

an electronic form of letter correspondence. Other media include text-chat programs, also referred to as instant messengers. These carry the benefit of being able to send and receive text messages with a relatively short delay, resulting in a text-chat, where users send messages back and forth as if they were engaged in a conversation. Latest developments even allow audio (voice) communication, with or without the use of a live video feed (making use of a webcam). This kind of communication is comparable to that of a telephone call, except that when using a webcam users can not only hear but also see one another.

Practical applications in ESL/EFL

These communication media have also sparked the interests of educators and researchers who intend to apply them to distance education programs, to name just one example. However, it has been observed that just as every teaching situation is unique and carries with it different variables and therefore a need to adapt methods to circumstances, this new medium (when applied to language teaching or learning) carries certain limitations not found in any conventional classroom as well. Certain pedagogical theories might not apply at all, or need to be applied in an appropriately adapted way. Virtual language classrooms are starting to come of age, yet are often expensive or fix students to a regular class time. This would limit the convenience that is supposed to be one of the benefits of distance learning.

Distance learning requires a great deal of discipline, intrinsic motivation, and for a learner to become autonomous in their learning process. What is salient in research done in the field of distance learning programs is that the ability to learn

independently is essential (Kötter, 2003; Little & Brammerts, 1996, Schwienhorst, 1997). This does not only mean being able to work without direct supervision of a teacher, but also to know when to seek advice from a teacher and on which matters. However, more often than not, these are skills developed over time and experience in self-delegating tasks and routines. Distance education often targets working professionals, perhaps for this reason. Working adults seeking to improve their career prospects and further their skills have the necessary motivation. Over the course of their professional lives, they have likely developed autonomy skills crucial to their work environment.

Tandem learning

An alternative to a language classroom is a language exchange partner: two people who each want to learn the other person's native language take turns in 'teaching' each other their respective mother tongue. The same applies to online tandem learning, where students who cannot afford or do not wish to enroll in an online language course can find a suitable partner for them to pair up with and form a so called e-Tandem or electronic tandem, also known as a tellecollaborative partnership. An e-tandem means to use electronic media to establish a tandem with one or more parties. A telecollaborative partnership is distance partnership, i.e. not face-to-face. The term collaborative indicates the reciprocal nature of the language exchange at a distance. Students can pick their mode of interaction, via e-mail, text-, audio-, or video-chat.

The distinguishing feature of e-mail is that it is a so-called asynchronous method of communication, meaning that in most cases, someone will not get a prompt or instant

reply from their interlocutor as is (supposed to be) the case with synchronous methods, which can include text-, audio-, or video-chat or a phone conversation. See the paragraph titled: "**The synchronous/asynchronous distinction in distance learning**" for more detailed information. In effect, learners become both teacher and learner at the same time, giving rise to many questions in terms of pedagogical value, responsibility and teacher-/learner-role division.

Towards possible guidelines for tandem learning: teaching presence

Some perspectives on the lack of collaboration, autonomy and reciprocity in tandem learning have been offered; some of the literature shows that differences in variables related to the learners' background explain the lack of either collaboration or negotiation of meaning (Belz, 2002; Kötter, 2003). However, these are factors which could not have been modified by either teachers or learners. Thus, there is a need for examining how continuous assessment, teaching presence and collaboration of peers and teachers are intertwined with the basic tenets of tandem learning: autonomy and reciprocity. It would be useful to find out how a teacher can help improve the process of continuous assessment from a perspective of these intrinsically bound concepts. Teaching presence here means involvement of a teacher in the learning process. This can include aiding students in goal setting before and adjusting these after a tandem, the monitoring of interaction during a tandem and the reflection on the learners' performance after a tandem. However, these examples are not exhaustive of the possible ways a teacher can be involved by being present at each of these stages (before, during and after) of tandem learning. Teaching presence according to Garrison et al. (2001, p.11) also includes instructional management, building

understanding and direct instruction (from Pawan et al., 2003). Taking these factors

as a given or an inevitable cause for problems might help to accept them and focus on

what can realistically be improved. A language learner's environment, facilities or

history are not likely to change for the sake of a language program. Nevertheless,

teaching presence and continuous assessment offer steps which teachers as well as

learners could take to help prepare themselves for a program, hopefully reducing the

problems caused by the conflict of interest and differing backgrounds, and improving

the amount and quality of potentially useful interaction.

Collaboration and cognitive presence

From prior research arises a need to investigate how learners collaborate in a program

(for example such as in Kötter's study) and analyze what type of strategies were used,

how they could have been applied better if learners had been prepared to use them

beforehand and which kind of strategies that were missing could have been useful in

these circumstances. The outcomes of this study might serve as part of a needs

analysis for the design of a prepratory course in collaboration in online tandem

learning. Of particular interest is how instruction is handled by the participants. This

questions the need for explicit teaching of skills, such as language repair or *cognitive*

presence in a critical or practical inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000;

Pawan et al., 2003). *Cognitive presence*: (a) the initiation phase with a *triggering*

event that begins the dialogue about a particular issue; (b) the *exploration* phase in

which learners move between private reflection and social exploration, exchanging

information about the issue at hand; (c) the *integration* phase in which participants

begin to "construct meanings" or solutions to the issue from the ideas explored in the

previous phase; and (d) the *resolution* phase in which the proposed solution is "vicariously tested" (from Garrison et al., 2001, p. 11, in Pawan et. al., 2003,).

Critical inquiry; also called practical inquiry (from Garrison et al., 2001, p. 11, in Pawan et. al., 2003): The practical inquiry model reflects four phases (mentioned above) of critical thinking and cognitive presence. It also constitutes Social Presence (Emotional Expression, Open Communication, Group Cohesion) and Teaching Presence (Instructional Management, Building Understanding and Direct Instruction). See figure 2 for an expanded, visual representation of this concept also referred to as a "practical inquiry model" (Garrison et al., 2001).
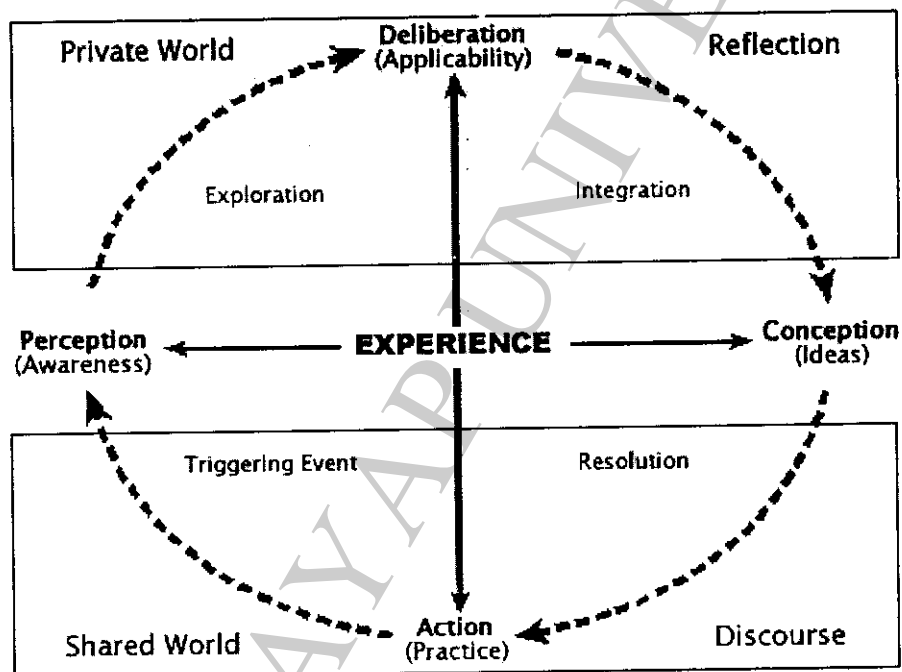

Figure 1: Practical inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001)

Adapting instruction to learner needs

The participants might actually be better off with less instruction, as some have

suggested (Gläsmann and Calvert, 2001). Findings and suggestions from Pawan et al.

(2003), such as establishing goals and concrete roles of learners at the outset of an

online course, need to be assessed for their practicality and applicability to language

learning tandems in synchronous mode. This assessment would stem from reflection

on both teacher and learner performance after tandem sessions. The way participants

perform might show whether, which and how these suggestions would make the most

sense to teach. Is the need to add these techniques dependent on the level of language

proficiency of the learners? Or is it a matter relating to the proficiency gap between

the two learners? Furthermore, the framework of Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2001)

would most likely need to be adapted to suit the purposes of this investigation. This

might provide further insight in distinguishing and overlapping features of pedagogy

between tandem language learning and other academic fields.

Objectives of the Thesis

"Do CALL and CMC provide enough opportunity for language learning?" This

fundamental question posed by Freiermuth (2002) raises other questions. Or in the

case of tandem learning; do learners create these opportunities for themselves? How

much needs to be made explicit by a teacher? As will be discussed later, creating such

opportunities is also a matter of reflection: we need to ask what could have served

these learners in a certain situation, were they to do the session again? How can a

teacher offer them these tools?

The objectives of this research may be set out in the following questions:

1. Autonomy and reciprocity are the two main tenets of Tandem learning (see also Kötter, 2003 and Little & Brammerts, 1996). Collaboration between peers in a tandem is important; cognitive presence is one way of estimating levels of collaboration (Garrison et al., 2001, in Pawan et al., 2003). How do autonomy, reciprocity, collaboration and teaching presence interrelate in a tandem? How can insight into this help to improve preparing learners for a tandem?

2. Which strategies do tandem partners use to collaborate on a given task; how is this affected by instruction? How might teaching presence be involved?

3. What should be addressed in a preparatory instructional protocol for priming learners for telecollaborative language partnerships?

Scope of the study

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine how much language was actually learned or retained after a course 'try-out'. Pre- and post-testing may reveal what has been momentarily retained, but this would not show long-term abilities. The amount of information which can be collected and processed in the current study is also limited.

Significance of the Study

A theoretical understanding of how collaboration might be effected can further aid those intending to prepare a group of learners to engage in an electronic exchange partnership or electronic tandem. Also, individuals who are interested in using this method as a means for independent language study might be able to set more realistic goals when they know which problems to anticipate and which problems they might be able to avoid. A growing body of research (e.g. Pawan et al. 2003) has indicated that these kinds of learners require more and better instruction in how to improve their collaborative on-line performance,and that further analysis of on-line learner discourse would be of benefit to this cause (Belz, 2002; Kötter, 2003).

On a broader scale, the current study could be relevant to issues regarding a changing global economy and global community. First of all, the current information age is marked by communication. There is a growing need to communicate on a global scale, for a growing number of people, using a growing number of media. This is starting to become obvious in the professional and personal lives of many who work or study abroad, or interact with people from other countries than their own. The concept of proficiency in a foreign language as a luxury is no longer valid. Not only is proficiency in a widely spoken language such as English crucial for many purposes, but for speakers of English to speak other languages just as well.

Second, distance learning provides a means to access necessary training, whether it concerns language learning or other education. Distance learning is not just an alternative to more traditional education, it could possibly become a necessity in the

near future. As the current wave of globalisation transforms many nations on earth in rapid fashion from collective societies to individualized ones, the distance between individuals increases and cultural barriers become more difficult to identify. However, a lack of information about each other's culture still leads to confusion. For this reason, Belz (2002) suggests learners to be prepared by 'cultural sensitization' as one method of preparation for tandem learning. This study also aims to uncover how learners' differing cultural knowledge influences their need for preparation, intervention or feedback provided by a teacher.

Third, the changing face of society requires establishment of new social norms, values and sense of community. Suburbanization, or urban sprawl can now be found surrounding many cities in Asia,. As these cities and their citizens become wealthier, a progressive exodus from the cities to previously rural areas (now converted into suburbs) starts to occur. The demand to have all commodities at hand (including education) while occupying one's 'own personal space' starts to emerge. An individual mindset develops in which the concept and value of community takes on a vastly different meaning. As illustrated by the participants in this current study, even living in a certain region does not imply full immersion in the local culture or language. Such assumptions need to be avoided: instead, what learners may lack in social and cultural awareness must be allowed to surface first. Due to the aforementioned individualization, these skills perhaps will vary to a greater degree in a younger generation such as in the participants of the current study, as they have developed into adults under different norms than their teachers likely have.

Fourth, practical and financial issues make distance learning attractive, while promoting consciousness of consumption. The rise in oil prices makes commuting increasingly expensive. Thus, an increase in demand for distance learning is not unthinkable. However, the need to develop a way which can maintain a positive coherence of individuals might increase accordingly. Non-traditional methods of developing individuals to become community members (i.e. from a Vygotskyian perspective) may aid in this task. Independence, individuality and autonomy must be fostered from this perspective to achieve a self-sustainable, collaborative environment in which every participant becomes a contributing member rather than merely a consumer.

Lastly, learning languages by distance might narrow or slow down the existing and growing distance between individuals. For many developed and developing countries, the demographical breakdown of an aging population with an ever diminishing workforce will cause a greater reliance on a fewer number of teachers per capita. Overhead expenses of education not only for individuals (commuting costs, rising tuition fees) but also for educational institutions will make distance education an attractive alternative. Thus, a gradual shift towards a necessity for capable peers and a community of learners to replace the traditional teacher-centered transfer of knowledge is likely to start evolving. In anticipation of these prospects, an attempt must be made to start to progressively close the gap of a growing physical and mental distance between individuals. By identifying some key points that will help us in the task of nurturing more conscious, self-sustained learners who collectively form a better learning community, we can serve future generations of language learners.