

Book Review

***Researching online foreign language interaction and exchange: theories, methods and challenges*, edited by Melinda Dooly & Robert O'Dowd (2012). Peter Lang, 348 pages, Paperback 73.20 €, ISBN: 978-3-0343-1155-7.**

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Since the late 1990s, online interaction and exchange have increasingly attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners in the field of foreign language (FL) education. The reasons for this trend can be found in a series of factors such as the growing access to new technologies and the resulting availability of quick and affordable ways of communicating across geographical boundaries (Crystal, 2006), an increased awareness of the importance of culture learning in FL education (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993), and the acknowledgment that learners' engagement in local or global networks can stimulate the development of online literacies that are important in today's labour market (Guth & Helm, 2010). These factors have contributed to opening up new possibilities for language learners to come into contact and interact with peers from different cultural and language backgrounds, in a way that seems to foster their communicative and intercultural competence (Liaw, 2006), as well as their digital skills.

As a result of these trends, a noteworthy number of studies on online FL interaction and exchange have flourished over the past few decades. What emerges from this growing body of literature is that research in the field of online interaction and exchange poses significant challenges: these include the choice of the most appropriate theoretical framework and methodology for conducting research, the difficulty of understanding how learners experience their learning processes from an emic perspective, the complexity of dealing with the availability of rich, multimodal and multiple sets of data originating from online interactions, as well as the ethical issues which arise when it comes to recording, collecting and analyzing online data. Aware of the wide array of approaches, paradigms and challenges that researchers are required to face when approaching the area of online interaction and exchange in FL education, Dooly and O'Dowd have edited a comprehensive guide for practitioners and newcomers to the field. The third in a series dedicated to online collaboration and interaction, the book *Researching online foreign language interaction and exchange: theories, methods and challenges* sheds light on all the issues cited above by offering a clear overview of some of the main methods and theoretical approaches to the

investigation of online FL interaction and exchange, as well as by providing interesting insights into some of the challenges that arise while carrying out this kind of research.

The volume is organized in three sections: the first one includes three chapters and explores some of the most commonly used theoretical frameworks to researching online exchange, ranging from sociocognitive and interactionist approaches to Cultural Historical Activity Theory and mixed methods approaches. Comprised of four chapters, the second section focuses on key areas of research and looks at how the use of different approaches, methods and tools for data collection and analysis can offer a better understanding of the processes at stake in online FL environments, including virtual worlds. Finally, the third section discusses the potential benefits of applying specific methods of data collection and analysis, namely corpus analysis and eye-tracker technology, all of which enrich the scope of data available in order to investigate learners' experiences in computer-mediated communication settings.

In the first chapter of the volume, Reinhardt examines two of the main methodological frameworks that have been used to research technology-mediated interaction in FL settings, namely input-interactionist and socio-cognitive approaches. In doing so, he focuses on their theoretical and methodological implications for research, highlighting the orientation of the interactionist framework towards quantitative and experimental methods, and the tendency of socio-cognitive frameworks to adopt naturalistic and qualitative methods for inquiry. While the two frameworks are often seen as antagonistic, Reinhardt advocates that an ecological approach to research can potentially “transcend the cognitive-social debate” (p. 67) by proposing a view of language, language learning practices and language learners as intertwining elements of a dynamic ecology. In methodological terms, such an approach offers a comprehensive view of the dynamics and variables at play in the learning process and thus contributes to overcoming the dichotomy that is traditionally associated with socio-cognitive and interactionist frameworks by combining qualitative and quantitative techniques.

In the second chapter of the book, Blin accounts for the potential of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) in conducting research in FL online interaction and exchange. With the goal to “understand individual human beings, as well as the social entities they compose, in their natural everyday life circumstances” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 31), this approach takes activity systems as the primary units for study, which are visually represented by intersecting triangles; activity systems allow researchers to explore how individual or collective subjects in a community construct a shared object by bringing in their own histories, positions in the division of labour and degrees of familiarity with the tools and artefacts available to them. According to Blin, the dynamic

nature of activity systems and the dialectical relationships that are formed between collective and individual actions make CHAT a potentially effective framework for researchers who want to explore the interrelatedness of collective language production activities and language development in online FL settings. Furthermore, CHAT appears to be particularly recommended for capturing and analyzing contradictions within and between activity systems as they manifest themselves in the form of conflict, breakdowns and tensions, thus opening up new opportunities to enhance the design of the foreign language curriculum.

In the chapter that follows, Ware and Rivas discuss the potential of mixed methods research designs to overcome traditional theoretical dichotomies by enabling researchers to combine both qualitative and quantitative perspectives and by encouraging “collaboration and respect for the unique contribution of each research methodology” (p. 127). In order to do so, the authors first trace the main features of mixed methods research, and then draw on existing literature to highlight how such an approach has been used to investigate online interaction and exchange in FL educational settings. In particular, the authors discuss the benefits of using a variety of qualitative and quantitative types of data –ranging from transcripts and observations to surveys and interviews– for triangulation i.e., corroboration of the findings emerging from the inquiry. To exemplify this, Ware and Rivas describe an online language learning project in secondary schools from Spain and the US, and show how both qualitative and quantitative stances were integrated to investigate the learners’ skills of interpreting and relating cultural events or artefacts (a component of Byram’s model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, 1997).

In the second section of the book, Dooly and Hauck discuss the increasingly important role played by multimodal communicative competence (MMC) in language learning processes, and the potential of online FL interaction and exchange in fostering the development of such ability. To this account, the authors argue for the need to investigate MMC in telecollaborative contexts, and pinpoint a series of issues and challenges that researchers need to face when approaching this area. These include, in particular, making decisions on how to collect, manage and analyse the written, audio and visual data that originate from multimodal settings, as well as carefully considering how the presence of the researcher may affect the whole process of data collection and investigation.

In the next chapter, Müller-Hartmann explores the benefits of adopting a case study approach to conduct Action Research (AR) in online FL interaction contexts. As he suggests, the term AR refers to research conducted by the teachers themselves within and outside the classroom, seeking to discern pedagogical implications for improved future practice. In this light, Müller-Hartmann highlights how the essentially qualitative nature of case studies makes them a particularly

suitable approach for teacher-conducted AR in online collaboration, in that it enables them to understand classroom and group interaction processes from the learners' perspective. In doing so, he describes a telecollaborative project between two teacher education seminars – from Germany and the US - outlining its goals as well as the ways in which data were collected in order to achieve these goals. Finally, the author exemplifies how activity theory (AT), within the AR perspective, can serve as a useful theoretical lens to analyze rich data sets collected in online environments, in order to grasp the “complex interrelations between human agents, computer tools and the sociocultural context” (p. 165).

The following chapter discusses research within the realm of virtual worlds. The authors, Panichi and Deustchmann, stress that virtual worlds foster a different type of FL learning than other online environments, and therefore merit special attention in research. After an overview of the main features of virtual worlds and of their potential for telecollaborative FL learning activities, the authors discuss a number of issues, which that researchers need to take into account when doing research on such environments. These include the complex types of data (verbal, non verbal, and aesthetic) that are retrievable from virtual worlds, the choice of appropriate tools for data observation, recording and collection, and awareness of learners' technical abilities and emotional comfort. The authors argue that these issues are important since they may impact researchers' attitudes and response towards the virtual environment. They also discuss ethical issues deriving from questions of avatar identity, privacy, copyright and consent.

In the last chapter of second section, Möllering and Levy focus on the analysis of intercultural competence in online FL collaborative environments. Specifically, the authors first discuss a number of key studies in the area of online intercultural exchange, highlighting the diversity of approaches and methods for data collection and analysis that they applied to explore aspects of intercultural learning. In the second half of the chapter, the authors suggest that this diversity may be traced back to the complex nature of culture itself, and discuss the concept of culture from five different yet interrelated perspectives: culture as elemental, culture as relative, culture as group membership, culture as contested and culture as individual. Based on these considerations, the authors make recommendations for the adoption of research designs that can capture the complexity of culture in today's online FL interaction settings.

In the chapter that follows, Vyatkina introduces the concepts of learner corpora and Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis, she then moves on to demonstrate through concrete examples the ways in which corpus analysis was applied to investigate the development of language awareness regarding the use of German modal particles. To this end, she uses a corpus of data

produced by American learners of German who participated in a college-level online exchange with native speakers of the target language. In her conclusions, the author highlights the strengths of corpus research in combining qualitative and quantitative methods and, therefore, in driving a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

The last chapter of the volume, by O'Rourke, is dedicated to eye-tracking technology, in other words the "recording of a subject's point of gaze during visual tasks" (p. 305), and to its potential in research on text-based synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). O'Rourke describes eye-tracking devices and procedures and provides examples from a collection of output logs and eye-tracker data involving learners of French, German and Spanish. On the basis of these data, the author demonstrates how and why eye-tracking is an ideal tool for capturing individual, first-person perspectives as they unfold in SCMC.

In light of the above, this volume edited by Dooley and O'Dowd represents an accessible tool that enables researchers to gain deeper understanding on key theoretical approaches, methods and tools that have been productively applied to the study of online FL interaction and becomes an essential guide for newcomers, as much as practitioners and experienced researchers who aspire to delve more deeply into the challenges and possibilities of this fascinating area.

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