Book review

Análisis metodológico de cursos y recursos para el aprendizaje de inglés como segunda lengua a través de la World Wide Web


This book - available only in Spanish - has grown out of the research Seiz carried out for his doctoral thesis (completed in 2004 in the Applied Linguistics Department of the Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain). The general aim of his research was to establish a sound framework for the pedagogical analysis of Web-based CALL resources, especially in the area of English as a Second/Foreign Language. Whilst maintaining this underlying purpose, the book also has a number of more specific objectives. These are:

1. a review of research literature relevant to Web-based CALL and language learning pedagogy from different, though related, fields,
2. the creation of a systematic method for the pedagogical analysis of Web-based language learning resources,
3. the subsequent development of a feasible tool to implement such an analysis,
4. the pedagogical study and evaluation of some existing Web-based language learning resources (for English), and
5. a consideration of the benefits or drawbacks of using the World Wide Web as an efficient environment for language learning from a pedagogical standpoint.

It is important to note that the book, though already fairly comprehensive, represents work in progress, and is seen by the author as a starting point for further multidisciplinary research work. Seiz includes suggestions for research, some of which, we learn, is already being carried out in the Applied Linguistics Department of the Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV).

Following an introductory first chapter, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide a theoretical review and discussion. Chapters 5 and 6 consider some practical applications of the theoretical issues discussed in the first part, while Chapter 7 contains an account of the analytical tool which Seiz has developed. Chapter 8 draws together the ideas discussed in the book and offers suggestions for future research. The annotated bibliography is usefully divided into topics and there are three appendices, one of which is in the form of ready-to-use PC-based software called WIRESLAB. This is an interactive database for the pedagogical analysis and evaluation of Web-based CALL resources that has been jointly developed by the author and Miguel Macías, a computer programmer from UPV.

As mentioned above, Chapters 2-4 are the most theoretical. Chapter 2 discusses some key features of the World Wide Web as a feasible environment for successful and efficient computer-assisted language learning. We learn something of the history of the Web, as well as some of the fundamental aspects of Web technology and the principles of Network-based learning. In this Chapter, Seiz also reflects upon the future of the Web for language learning. As one might expect, he believes that it is, or at least has the potential of being, a viable environment for successful communicative language learning.

Chapter 3 attempts to provide a state-of-the-art account of the possibilities for language learning offered by the Web and which have been reviewed in the literature.
Issues discussed here include classifications of resources, studies on the pros and cons of Web-based language learning and previous suggestions for both analytical and descriptive frameworks and for pedagogical evaluation tools.

The purpose of the somewhat dense and long Chapter 4, is to establish the theoretical foundations from which an analysis of the Web, and Web-based resources, for language learning purposes can properly be carried out. It is from this foundation that Seiz develops the evaluation software which he describes in subsequent chapters. The theoretical foundation is laid by carrying out a comprehensive review of the research from various fields related to language learning and the Web (specifically, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Language Learning Pedagogy and Methodology, and Educational Psychology, gathering together the major findings from this research, and organising these into a coherent and usable framework.

In Chapter 5, Seiz incorporates the key findings from the literature review in the previous chapter to develop an interactive database (the software included with the book) which can be used to analyse Web-based CALL resources for language learning-teaching purposes. The database (based on Microsoft Access), is called WIRESLAB (which stands for Web-based Interactive Resources for English as a Second Language Analytical Base), and uses 170 parameters drawn from the literature review to analyse Web-based CALL resources from different perspectives. The parameters are divided into 5 categories: (1) Identification data (structure, objectives, level, etc.); (2) Technical data (technical aspects including user-friendliness); (3) Pedagogical data (this includes a lengthy list of items, such as exercise type, and incorporates many of the findings from the literature review); (4) Miscellaneous data (additional information such as possibility of customisation, errors, etc.); and (5) Additional standpoints (a space for the points of view of the developers of the resource, other researchers or students). This database also allows for the possibility of conducting advanced searches of resources within a given corpus, such as websites with certain types of exercises or topics. A useful feature is the possibility of presenting statistics, graphs and reports of the resources being evaluated. 170 parameters results in a comprehensive and multidisciplinary tool that can, nevertheless, be readily adapted to different circumstances and needs, since, for example, not all the parameters need to be used at the same time. Seiz provides a detailed explanation of every single parameter, together with a justification for their inclusion.

Chapter 6 presents the results of a field study of 45 interactive resources on the Web for learning English as a second language, using the WIRESLAB database, and thus illustrates how it can be of use in real situations. The results of this study support previous research, which indicates that Web-based CALL resources are not being used to their fullest advantage.

A theoretical framework for the pedagogical analysis of the Web for language learning is described in Chapter 7. The framework is 'interactive' in the sense that each component is informed by, influenced by, and feeds back on, the other elements of the model. Seiz gives the framework six dimensions: (1) Theoretical base (drawn from the literature review and Seiz’s own research); (2) Specific pedagogical characteristics (features of Web-based CALL resources that can be analysed with the parameters in WIRESLAB); (3) General pedagogical characteristics (features of the Web as a language learning environment); (4) Specific pedagogical applications (the potential practical applications of Web-based resources for language learning in a given pedagogical context); (5) General pedagogical applications (the potential of the Web as a place for implementing given methodologies or practices); and (6) Active components (those elements with an active role in Web-based language learning environments). Included here are the teacher, the learner, the content, the medium and the learning context. Thus, the Framework enables the Web as a language learning environment to be studied from many different perspectives in a coherent way. Alternatively, an individual with a particular interest in a particular component could, if he or she so wished, focus only on that aspect.

In the final chapter, Seiz draws together the conclusions from his research and offers useful suggestions for future research. The book also includes an extensive annotated
One of the principal merits of the book is its success in gathering together, in a comprehensive way, the findings from a multidisciplinary background, in order to develop an analytical tool for evaluating Web-based CALL resources on the basis of sound pedagogical criteria. Evaluation can be carried out from a practical point of view (as in the field study, or the development of the software itself), or with an emphasis on theoretical issues (as in the literature review or the development of the Framework). As Seiz himself points out in p. 358, it is necessary to bridge the gap between applied and theoretical research when discussing educational issues in general and Web-based CALL in particular.

The scope of the book is certainly very broad, and at times I would have preferred more treatment of some issues which the author only touches on (for example learning objects, metadata or standards). Nevertheless, the book provides a comprehensive approach to the pedagogical analysis of Web-based environments and resources for language learning that ranges over many issues of both a theoretical and practical nature. Moreover, it includes a database tool which I can imagine being very useful for CALL practitioners. I do not know whether updates of later versions of the software will be available for registered purchasers, but I have always thought publishers should make these available.

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