Book review

ICT - Integrating Computers in Teaching
Creating a Computer-Based Language-Learning Environment

Author: David Barr
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Many teachers will, I feel sure, be attracted by the main title, and will then perhaps have second thoughts when they find that the sub-title is "Creating a Computer-Based Language-Learning Environment". My advice to those who are not language teachers, as well as to those who are, is that they will find this a rewarding read. Certainly the context is language learning, but that is a context within which many transferable points and suggestions are effectively made. I warmed to the fact that the first third of the book deals readably and usefully with the main features of today’s computer-based learning environment, in a way which does not require one to be a computer-buff to assimilate. I found the use of language learning as an example extremely helpful, as well as interesting. The writer admittedly did not tell me, or perhaps other interested readers, much of which we are not already aware - but he managed to make and highlight some good general points, to which we have probably not given sufficient thought. The presentation style demonstrates how clearly such points can be made when they are presented in generic terms, illustrated perhaps by a particular example, but never overly subject-specific.

There follow three very full case-studies illustrating the contribution of computers to language learning in Ulster, Cambridge and Toronto. The non-linguist will find these over-detailed, I suspect, but the style is such that skimming by those who so wish is simple; and, after all, there must be few texts on educational topics where some sections are not of less interest to a particular reader than are others. The comparison which followed, for instance, sufficed for me with relatively little amplification from the case-study detail. The writer thoughtfully compares and contrasts these very different examples and draws from that analysis conclusions which I found thoughtful, generally relevant, and of interest and use to me. However I imagine that those who teach languages will read the case studies, which are written in reader-friendly style, with keen interest, picking out similarities and contrasts to their own present practices, and identifying useful ideas in the process.

The review with which the text then closes I found thoughtful and thought-provoking, though I could have wished for less reliance the three case-studies and rather more reference to other examples, of which even readers from this discipline may be unaware. If you teach languages, you will find much that is stimulating in this book, and useful frameworks within which to organise your thinking and planning. I would commend it as an item to put on your shopping list. For non-linguists who may be tempted by the promise of the main title, I would advise that the promise will be fulfilled - and that they will find this text readable and helpful, provided they are prepared to skim a little on the case studies, and so well-worth borrowing for selective reading.

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