

Melinda Dooly & Robert O'Dowd

# Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange

Theories, Methods and Challenges

TELECOLLABORATION IN EDUCATION

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PETER LANG

# Researching Online Interaction and Exchange in Foreign Language Education: Introduction to the Volume

MELINDA DOOLY & ROBERT O'DOWD

## The Rise of Online Interaction and Exchange in Foreign Language Education

In the first volume of this series on telecollaboration in education, Guth and Helm presented a collection of chapters which outlined how contemporary online communication technologies are currently being used in Foreign Language (FL) education to connect learners around the world in order to develop FL competency, intercultural awareness and e-literacies. Describing their field of activity as 'telecollaboration 2.0', the contributors to the volume demonstrated how the emergence of the Web 2.0 mindset and its technologies are shaping how FL education is being understood and is being practised at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Following on from the work of Guth and Helm, this volume continues with the themes of computer mediated communication (CMC) and telecollaborative exchange in FL education. However, instead of focussing exclusively on current 2.0 FL practice, this volume aims to provide an accessible introduction to some of the many methods and theoretical approaches being used to investigate the different configurations of FL interaction and exchange in online environments. We also aim to present an overview of the key issues which are very often unique to FL research contexts in the sense of being virtual, intercultural and multimodal. While the chapters in this volume do deal with how to investigate telecollaborative 2.0 activity,

the authors also try to cater for a wider range of configurations of online FL interaction which includes in-class interaction, class-to-class interaction as well as learner interaction with the outside world. We have, therefore, deliberately avoided both the terms 'telecollaboration' and '2.0' in our title and have chosen to use the more generic term 'online interaction and exchange' in an attempt to attend to the many different ways in which online communication technologies are being used to engage FL learners in interaction around the world today. Another reason for doing this is that we are aware of the tendency of technologies and online communicative practises to date and to change quickly. We would hope that the methodologies and issues presented in this volume will still be relevant when '2.0' has been replaced by 'Web 3.0' or indeed 'Web 4.0' technologies.

At this stage, we believe that a publication on research methodology in this area is both relevant and necessary as there are many researchers who are coming from other areas of FL education or who are beginning their careers as researchers in the area of online interaction and exchange and we hope that this volume will provide them with insight into the particular challenges and situations which this area of language learning implies. Moreover, as more and more educators are beginning to engage their learners in this type of interaction the need for circumspection and reflection in their own practices indicates a growing need for practitioner research for improving and building on these innovative approaches (Doohy, 2009).

Since its emergence as a relatively new area of research within the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning in the late 1990's, online interaction and exchange has been the subject of a great deal of high quality published research in the literature. Various indexed journals have dedicated large amounts of space to research in this area (e.g. *Language Learning and Technology*, *ReCALL*, *Computer Assisted Language Learning* to mention but a few) and there is a growing number of monographs (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Levy & Stockwell, 2006; O'Dowd, 2006) and edited collections (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Guth & Helm, 2010; Muyskens, 1998; O'Dowd, 2007;

Warschauer & Kern, 2000) on the area. But it is perhaps fair to ask at this stage why online interaction and exchange –and research in this area– have become such an important area of FL education. We would argue that this has come about due to a combination of various developments which are outlined briefly here.

The first of these is related to the significant increase in the availability of user-friendly online technologies in educational contexts around Europe and elsewhere, in a large part brought about by cheaper computer hardware and widespread access to high-quality internet connections. In many western countries at least, FL educators at primary, secondary and university level are now able to provide their learners with computers, laptops, tablets and other mobile devices at relatively low cost. A recent European Commission report on the use of ICT to support innovation and lifelong learning reported that already in 2006 67% of schools reported having broadband connections in their schools (Commission of the European Communities, 2008: 23–34). Increased internet access in educational institutions has coincided with the emergence of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis and podcasts as easy-to-use tools for FL education. The intuitive and user-friendly nature of many of these Web 2.0 tools has meant that FL educators can now engage their learners in online networking and publishing without possessing a great deal of technical knowledge or programming ability. This combination of cheap internet access and easy-to-use Web 2.0 technologies has meant that online interaction and exchange has become much easier to integrate into FL learning classrooms and, consequently, is also much easier to research.

However, we would argue that, apart from these ‘technical’ developments, there are three other principle reasons for the increased attention being paid to online FL interaction and exchange by both educators and researchers. The first of this has been the widespread acceptance in the FL education community of the importance of culture in FL learning and, furthermore, the recognition of the propensity for structured online intercultural interaction to support the development of learners’ cultural awareness and skills of intercultural