



Focus on: Computer-mediated Communication and Language Learning

This special edition of the *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society* is dedicated to the theme of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) in the context of language learning. This is the first of two special editions of the Journal that is publishing papers from the joint EUROCALL CMC and Teacher Education Special Interest Groups' Workshop held at CILTA, University of Bologna in March 2012. The theme chosen for the Workshop was "Learning through Sharing: open resources, open practices, open communication" because of the ever-increasing interest on the part of practitioners not only in foreign language teaching (FLT) but in education in general in 'all things open'. Over nearly the past two decades, outside of education, the concepts of 'open' and 'knowledge sharing' have achieved great success through movements such as the open source movement¹ and projects such as Wikipedia². During the same time period the Web has changed and is now characterized by what is commonly called "Web 2.0". This term refers to the shift from expert-generated content published on the Web to user-generated content shared and published on the Web through blogs, wikis and social networking sites. What brings these movements and projects together is the concept of "the wisdom of the crowds" (Surowiecki, 2004) by which the aggregation and sharing of knowledge benefits the collective whole, the Web being the medium through which this takes place.

Changes in education influence changes in society and vice versa. Given the amount of materials produced across the globe by individual teachers and students, the open resources movement has become an established field with a strong movement. There are now websites such as the Open Educational Resources Commons³ and Language Open Resources Online⁴ specifically for foreign and second language teaching which continue to grow and promote the benefits of knowledge sharing. The Workshop, however, aimed to broaden the scope of 'open' and 'sharing' to open practices (amongst language teachers) and open communication (amongst language teachers and students) as network-

¹ <http://opensource.org/>

² <http://www.wikipedia.org/>

³ <http://www.oercommons.org/>

⁴ <http://loro.open.ac.uk/>

ks of teachers and students certainly appear to be engaging in these activities across Europe and the globe. These concepts were defined as follows in the Call for Papers:

- Open Educational Resources (OER): “materials used to support education that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared by anyone” (Downes, 2011).
- Open Educational Practices (OEP): practices which “support the production, use and reuse of high quality OER through institutional policies, which promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path.” (ICDE, 2011).
- Open Communication: reciprocal and respectful exchange which contributes to social presence in online learning (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), and the development of intercultural awareness and competence in language learning.

Whereas OER has become a popular movement and OEP has a broadly accepted definition, open communication does not yet have an established definition – and yet it is the underlying theme of this issue as the focus is on CMC. Our guiding definition of CMC is the one proposed by Herring (1996, p. 1): “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” hence all forms of communication between people mediated by computers, which can take place using anything from email to synchronous text chat, video-conferencing to virtual worlds. In (foreign language) FL education CMC has been used for interaction both between members of the same language class (inter-class) and, increasingly, for online intercultural exchange or telecollaboration (O’Dowd, 2006, 2007; Dooly, 2008) between classes (intra-class). We see ‘open communication’ as a broad concept which encompasses the sharing of knowledge and intellectual capital with others, communication in ‘open’ environments (e.g. through online gaming, virtual worlds, international discussion boards) and open dialogue, where there is no evasion of difficult or controversial topics and where diverse opinions are valued.

Language educators have long embraced technology for language teaching because of the opportunities it offers for language practice. Since the 1960s CMC has emerged as an important branch of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and was initially used to prepare students for ‘real’, that is face-to-face (F2F), communication. However, the last two decades have seen a paradigm change as the impact of CMC has extended to all areas of life, not only communication and education. As Giddens said, “instantaneous electronic communication isn’t just a way in which news and information is conveyed more quickly. Its existence alters the very texture of our lives” (1999, p. 3).

In 2001, Crystal predicted that CMC would probably soon be more frequent than F2F communication for many people, and this time has come for many. In the world of work but also in the personal and social lives of many people, there has been a huge increase in transnational communication, collaboration and cooperation which requires not only foreign language but also intercultural competences and online literacies (Guth & Helm, 2010). For language educators, CMC is no longer solely a means to promote language learning, but rather it represents a myriad of communication modes and contexts in which our students must become efficient communicators in a foreign language as well as in their own language. The European Commission's document "New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now" (2010), for example, calls on educators to develop new methodological techniques which facilitate the integration of digital, linguistic and intercultural skills and competences. This goal, it is suggested, is best achieved by integrating "more cross-curricular and innovative approaches, such as learning-by-doing or project-based learning" (p. 26).

Foreign language educators need to become competent online communicators with a social presence and a series of techno-pedagogical competences. Today, as Guichon and Hauck (2011) point out, there is general acknowledgement of "the key role played by teachers in mediating online language learning based on the ability to assess the affordances of any given tool – the possibilities and constraints for making meaning and communication offered by the available modes (Hampel, 2006) – and the ability to use these according to the learners' needs, task demands, and desired learning outcomes" (p.188). CMC is both an object of study, as FL teacher education programs and EU-funded projects increasingly provide modules on CALL and CMC, and a tool for professional development and methodological reflection with many FL teacher education courses online or in blended mode. However, Dooly (2009) points out, "there appears to be a gap between teacher training that aims to provide 'isolated coursework in CALL' and a focus on 'the development of a sequence of situated technology experiences for teachers' (Egbert *et al.*, 2002: 122)" (p.353).

Research on CALL, CMC and language learning has a longer history and also greater critical mass than research on teacher education in CALL and CMC, yet this too is relatively short. Dooly and O'Dowd point out that "collections of classroom practice and anecdotal research [...] were not replaced by in-depth studies of online interaction and exchange until the late 1990's." (2012, p.22). Research into CMC and FL learning has been characterized by two main paradigms, the cognitive interactionist approach and social-informed approaches (Reinhardt, 2012). The former is grounded in interactionist perspectives and psycholinguistic theories of SLA which focus on negotiation of meaning and peer correction both inter-class and intra-class (see eg. Blake, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000; Tudini, 2003). Studies tend to be experimental and adopt

predominantly quantitative methods. The latter approach emphasizes the social aspects of language learning as situated learning and the socio-psychological functions of communication. The focus of studies following this perspective has been not only on the development of linguistic competence but also intercultural communicative competence, particularly in studies focusing on tele-collaboration (see eg. O’Dowd, 2003; Ware & Kramersch, 2005; Abrams, 2009). The predominant methodological approach is qualitative though increasingly mixed methods approaches which combine qualitative and quantitative data are being adopted. Whilst these have been considered divergent frameworks around which there has been considerable debate, recently there has been an increase in studies combining aspects of each and, Reinhardt notes, “middle ground might be found by exploring the regions where theories and methods overlap” (2012, p.62).

In their 2011 editorial for a special edition of the journal *ReCALL* dedicated to teacher education research in CALL and CMC, Guichon and Hauck point out that “The role of teachers and tutors in technology-enhanced contexts has long been under-explored by CALL researchers, as if language learning could occur thanks to the attraction of tools and as a result of the potential for enhanced learner autonomy” (p.188). They identify four key areas of research in the field: assessment on the use of technologies in teachers’ practices, identification of pre- and in-service teachers’ attitudes towards technologies, definition of a repertoire of techno-pedagogical competences, and reflections on the training content and experiences and subsequently discuss these areas. Research has relied predominantly on surveys and interview data, but more recently, the authors argue, there has been a move towards action research and reflective practice (op. cit., p.192).

CMC and ‘open communication’ in both FL education and teacher education are explored in the contributions to this issue which reflect the variety of communication modes that CMC offers, from discussion fora to blogs, video-conferencing to virtual worlds, and a range of research approaches, from the purely theoretical to quantitative studies, qualitative studies and mixed methods approaches. In terms of research paradigms, some of the papers are situated within a predominantly interactionist framework, focusing on features such as speaker status and turn length (e.g. Leone). Other papers focus on open practices and open communication and adopt more of a socio-cognitive⁵ lens (e.g. Bortoluzzi, Riordan & Murray). Some of the common issues which emerge regard changing teacher and student identities and roles, participation patterns, reflection, knowledge sharing and the development of communities of practice.

The issue opens with a paper by Guarda who presents an overview of the

⁵ We take Reinhardt’s use of the term socio-cognitive as an umbrella term for the social side of the cognitive-social debate.

role CMC has played in the field of language learning over the past 50 years, and where it might be headed in the future. The paper highlights the intricate relationship between technological developments, changes in theoretical approaches and, consequently, changes in teaching practice. Given the inherent importance of communication when learning a foreign language, the field of FLT has been at the forefront of research in the implementation of CMC for classroom settings, as this paper illustrates. Guarda's contribution is followed by a theoretical work by Gobbi that touches again on this intricate relationship between technology and education. Gobbi argues that there is an analogy between language development and the development of the Web, highlighting the importance of informal learning in each individual's process of acquiring knowledge, be it linguistic knowledge or that of other fields. He concludes that educational practices in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) would benefit greatly from integrating use of the Web into everyday teaching and learning.

Following these two introductory papers are a series of papers that investigate the role of CMC and open communication in second/foreign language learning and teacher education. The first of this series is a paper by Leone that focuses on issues of leadership, dominance and roles in the context of Teletandem. Leone uses quantitative and qualitative analysis to investigate how students behave when engaging in CMC with native speakers of the language they are studying who are also language learners of their own native language. Glombitza then presents qualitative results based on student feedback and teacher observation from a pilot project where practice enterprise, a technique more commonly used in business education, was adapted to the context of communicative language learning in a virtual context. Through CMC, students from four European countries engaged in simulated business interactions using English as a lingua franca, developing both their language and intercultural communication skills. The author highlights how the blended nature of the course allowed the teacher to focus on reporting, de-briefing and problem solving during the face-to-face class sessions leading to informed discussion and reflection on the learning that was taking place as a result of the project. Gruson and Barnes, then, deal with the issue of CMC and young learners, an area which is attracting growing interest from practitioners, but in which there is, as Dooly and O'Dowd (2012) point out, "a paucity of research" (p.19). They use a qualitative analysis of transcripts from a telecollaborative videoconferencing session in which primary school pupils and their teachers in France and the UK were engaged in playing Cluedo. They explore the constraints that the teachers faced and the impact of the medium on pupils' L1 and L2 use.

Riordan and Murray's paper then changes the focus to open communication and practices amongst a community of teacher trainees. Through corpus-based

discourse analysis of interactions occurring in face-to-face and online settings they look at how features of language use reflect three aspects of community membership defined in the Community of Practice framework: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). Neuhoff and Bortoluzzi then shift the attention to in-service teachers. Neuhoff describes the reactions of teachers from 4 different European countries to a blended learning course aimed at helping teachers learn to implement the use of Web 2.0 tools in their own contexts. The paper demonstrates that simply putting in-service teachers in contact with one another is not an immediate recipe for the creation of a community of practice where teachers feel comfortable sharing their own experiences and ideas. She concludes by offering what could be done to help in-service teachers be more inclined to adapt their practice to changes in technology. Then Bortoluzzi takes us to the relatively unexplored realm of virtual worlds. Through qualitative analysis of the narratives of teachers, in particular language teachers, who have used Second Life in their teaching, she reports on the teachers' perceptions of what changes when the classroom 'moves' online. She discusses the new roles and identities that teachers and learners alike take on in these new spaces and questions whether Second Life can really offer a culturally-neutral space for learning. The last article in the issue by Helm and Guth investigates teachers' opinions regarding disagreement, conflict and the discussion of sensitive topics in online intercultural exchange, e.g. religious and/or political views, which they argue is necessary for open intercultural dialogue to take place. They use quantitative and qualitative analyses based on a survey and discussions with in-service teachers to explore this contentious issue and report a divergence of views on this topic which, they suggest, should be further addressed in research and teacher education.

Although all the papers make specific reference to the context of FLT, they undoubtedly show how new approaches and new tools can be used to exploit the affordances of the Internet for learning in all contexts. As trans-national and trans-cultural learning scenarios become more and more commonplace across the globe and in all disciplines, educators are confronted with the challenges of adapting their practice to new contexts, students and technologies. Rather than proposing conclusive solutions to these challenges, the papers in this issue offer readers examples of what the challenges may be and pose questions as to how we, as a community of educators and researchers, might proceed from here.

Acknowledgements

The editors of this issue would like to thank the scientific and organizing committees, in particular Ana Beaven, Anna Comas Quinn, Luisa Bavieri and Lucia Livatino for the excellent job they did in providing a forum for the

discussion of open resources, open practices and open communication at the CMC and Teacher Education SIGs' annual workshop held in Bologna, Italy in 2012. We would also like to thank the many reviewers who during the summer months found time to help us improve the quality of the contributions to this issue. Finally, we would like to thank Valentina Elvira Comba and all of the staff at Je-LKS for their help and support.

*Sarah Guth, Francesca Helm
Università di Padova, Italy*

REFERENCES

- Abrams Z. (2009), *Sociopragmatic features of learner-to-learner computer-mediated communication*, CALICO Journal, 26 (1), 1-27.
- Blake R. (2000), *Computer mediated communication: A window on L2 Spanish interlanguage*, Language Learning & Technology, 4, 120-136.
- Crystal D. (2001), *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge, CUP.
- Dooly M. (2008), *Telecollaborative Language Learning*, Bern, Peter Lang.
- Dooly M. (2009), *New competencies in a new era? Examining the impact of a teacher training project*, ReCALL, 21 (3) 353-369.
- Dooly M. & O'Dowd R. (2012), *Introduction to the Volume*. In M. Dooly and R. O'Dowd (eds.) *Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange*, Bern, Peter Lang, pp.11-44.
- Downes S. (2011), *Open Educational Resources: A Definition*, URL: <http://halfanhour.blogspot.co.uk/2011/07/open-educational-resources-definition.html> (accessed on 1st September 2012)
- European Commission (2010), *New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now, A report by the expert group on new skills for new jobs prepared for the European Commission*. URL: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=568&langId=en> (accessed on 1st September 2012).
- Giddens A. (1999), *Globalisation*, Reith lecture. URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/events/reith_99/week1/week1.htm (accessed on 1st September 2012)
- Guichon N. and Hauck M. (2011), *Teacher education research in CALL and CMC: more in demand than ever*, ReCALL, 23(3), 187-199.
- Gunawardena C. N., and Zittle F. J. (1997), *Social Presence as a Predictor of Satisfaction within a Computer-Mediated Conferencing Environment*, American Journal of Distance Education, 11(3), 8-26.
- Guth S. and Helm F., eds. (2010), *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language Literacies and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century*, Bern, Peter Lang.
- Herring S. (1996), *Introduction*, in: Herring S. (ed.), *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Amsterdam,

- John Benjamins, pp. 1-10.
- ICDE (2011) *Definition of Open Educational Practices*. URL: http://www.icde.org/en/resources/open_educational_quality_initiative/definition_of_open_educational_practices/ (accessed on 1st September 2012)
- O'Dowd R. (2003), *Understanding the "other side"; Intercultural learning in a Spanish-English e-mail exchange*, *Language Learning & Technology*, 7, 118-144.
- O'Dowd R. (2006), *Telecollaboration and the development of intercultural communicative competence*, Berlin, Langenscheidt.
- O'Dowd R. (2007), *Online Intercultural Exchange. An introduction for foreign language teachers*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters.
- Pellettieri J (2000), *Negotiation in cyberspace: The role of chatting in the development of communicative competence*, in M. Warschauer & R. Kern (eds.) *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 59-86.
- Reinhardt R. (2012), *Accommodating Divergent Frameworks in Analysis of Technology-Mediated L2 Interaction*, in M. Dooly and R. O'Dowd (eds.), *Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange*, Bern, Peter Lang, pp. 45-78.
- Surowiecki, J. (2004), *The Wisdom of Crowds*, New York, Doubleday
- Tudini V. (2003), *Using native speakers in chat*, *Language Learning & Technology*, 7, 141-159.
- Ware P.& Kramsch K. (2005), *Toward an intercultural stance: teaching German and English through telecollaboration*, *Modern Language Journal*, 89 (2), 190-205.