

# Interviews

## CALL, self-directed learning & learner autonomy

Mark Warschauer is Professor of Education and Informatics at the University of California, Irvine, where he directs both the Ph.D. in Education program and the Digital Learning Lab. He has published eight books and over 100 papers on the role of new technologies in language learning, literacy development, and educational reform. He has previously taught at Moscow State Linguistic University, Charles University in Prague, and the University of Hawaii, and has conducted research in the U.S., China, Brazil, Egypt, Mexico, Singapore, and Japan. He is currently a visiting scholar at Waseda University where he is completing a new book on digital media and learning and conducting research on the use of mobile devices for language learning.

### *Mark Warschauer with Brian R. Morrison*

Professor Warschauer kindly accepted an interview with Bob Morrison to discuss some of the areas where computer assisted language learning overlap with self-directed learning and learner autonomy.

**Thank you for giving us some time to discuss learning with technology. Just as an introduction, could you outline what Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) covers, now we are in 2011?**

Well, I think it covers just about anything that you want it to. It certainly includes all sorts of digital media, mobile devices, iPod touches, iPads, and virtually anything you do on the Internet so we're seeing a lot of combinations. For example, I have a PhD student working with Live Mocha ([www.livemocha.com](http://www.livemocha.com)), an international social networking site for language learning. It relates closely with independent learning because it is a site that doesn't necessarily fit into course structures, and any learner around the world can join but it includes both tutorial type lessons and lots of opportunities to chat and get feedback from people globally so it's interesting to me how it combines both the traditional and the new. I think we're going to see more and more of that in the future.

**Yes, and there are many opportunities for autonomous learners to use digital technology and the Internet to pursue their learning goals but then we have students who do not do much outside of the classroom. Are you aware of any ways to encourage students to become more independent using the technology available?**

Sure, I think we can introduce students to activities in class that can build students' motivation to pursue their goals outside of class. For example there's a university in Japan which includes Skype-based conversational practice with teachers from the Philippines. For Japanese students who may never have had the opportunity to use English as a communicative tool, but instead have only viewed it as an object of grammatical study, this experience can boost their confidence and give them exposure to an alternative way of looking at English. The hope is that this will encourage them to continue with computer-mediated communication, or face-to-face communication outside the classroom.

**So by introducing some activities, it can act as a springboard to students going off and doing further work of their own volition, right?**

Sure, and you can consciously introduce them to activities that can be easily carried out and are not dependent on expensive software but are ones that they could continue using outside of class, such as Skype, for example.

**For teachers who are technology-curious but may not have used much, or any, new technology with learners, could you give any ideas of where to start?**

Well, one thing is that you don't have to do everything at once because technology can be quite overwhelming. So, I would recommend you choose one thing you would like to try, perhaps blogging, or Skype, or a discussion forum, or text chat. Then try it out in small ways without feeling like you have to become expert at everything – start small and build on that.

**In staffrooms and Q & A sessions at conferences, I have heard teachers discussing the issue of students being off-task during class work e.g. instead of doing a web quest, they are checking their email. Do you have any advice to help teachers who are experiencing such problems?**

One way to look at that is to try to bring the technologies students find appealing into the pedagogy. I teach a university class on teaching English abroad and of course chatting, tweeting and Facebook are popular with my students and I try to use these. There is a piece of software called Today'sMeet (todaysmeet.com) I sometimes use. It creates a Twitter-like interface. I put that on the projector and I invite students to either raise their hands and ask or type a question right up on the board as I'm lecturing or talking about a subject. I'm fortunate in this class to have a teaching assistant – it's a class of about 60 students – and he monitors the discussion and responds to it while I lecture or vice versa. So, it's a case of if you can't beat them, join them. But can I guarantee that students are always on-task when they are using technology? No, of course not. But then I can't guarantee they are not doodling or daydreaming without technology so it's just a risk I have to take.

**We're fortunate to have the access to technology in our universities. However, in some countries CALL equipment is not available in classrooms but Internet access is widely available in Internet cafes. Do you know of any CALL projects that have been structured to this type of environment?**

There was a project in Egypt where this happened. Some of the university professors set up web-based activities, which they then encouraged students to participate in. A number of students became very enthusiastic and worked on these activities in Internet cafes.

**Were the students directed to websites or was it freer than that?**

I can't remember the exact details but it raises an important point. As a teacher, you would never just put students in the classroom and walk out and expect them to learn. It is important to guide them and the same is true when they are using the Internet. The general principle is that guidance, scaffolding and support all help. You know, you can't just send students out on the web and hope something would come out of that.

**That's a good point. So, do you think initiatives such as One Laptop per Child [a project where laptops were distributed to children in areas of relative poverty] have been successful?**

I recently published a paper on One Laptop per Child and I think that project has largely been a failure. Now, the ideas of integrating laptop computers in education has not failed but the particular project One Laptop per Child was not successful because of the framework behind it for the reasons I've mentioned already – if you give students laptops and get out of their way and presume they'll learn, well the projects around the world that have tried that have been largely unsuccessful.

The laptops breakdown and there is no one to fix them or the students use laptops in ways that are not particularly beneficial to their education. In fact, laptop use is fragmented in that the students who are most able to begin with and most educationally orientated use laptops in the most educationally purposeful ways and the ones that are not, don't.

If we consider to projects in the US, even though the US is one of the most computerized countries in the world, we still have the same educational gaps between rich and poor, black and white, that we

had before. It is clear that the mere presence of technology is not the critical aspect, it's how the technology is used. Now, that's somewhat contradictory to the idea of autonomous learning because we are hoping that people can learn autonomously - and I think that people can - but a lot of attention must be given to developing the right materials and the right guidance to people to encourage autonomous learning with those materials. These are the real challenges in the area of education through digital media, not merely passing out iPads or laptops to our students and expecting them to become great language learners, but rather considering what types of strategies, training, and resources that we can develop to help students learn autonomously through those media.

Having said that, the technology itself has affordances. For example someone with a smart phone is going to be more willing and interested in using that phone for autonomous learning than someone with a normal phone because the smart phone will have a lot more technology, be a lot more interesting and have a lot more apps [software] but the smart phone itself won't make you smarter.

**Given all that you have said, if you had the opportunity to direct a new One Laptop per Child project, what would you do differently?**

I would have half as many laptops - not necessarily students sharing but perhaps have it from 4<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> grade rather than 1<sup>st</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> grade - and have a budget for curriculum development, pedagogical development, assessment development, teacher training, infrastructure, repairs and Internet access. In other words, spend less money on laptops and more on all the things that create the environment and infrastructure whereby laptops can improve education.

**What would you say are the main challenges for CALL, particularly with regards to fostering learner autonomy?**

Mobile devices and cracking that code - for a long time people have been talking about the potential of using cell phones to promote language learning and although they have been talking about it, it hasn't really happened. I don't think a high percentage of language learners have been using phones for autonomous language learning. My hypothesis is that smart phones have a lot more potential in that regard. There is a difference between hard determinism and soft determinism. Hard determinism says the technology itself determines everything. Soft determinism says they technology does not force something to happen but it allows it to happen, and I think a smart phone enables types of interaction for language learning in ways a simple cell phone doesn't.

There is a lot of potential since in many countries we are seeing that point where many more university students have smart phones compared to last year and in a couple of years most students are likely to own them so there is definitely a lot of potential.

**I believe you are coming to the end of a sabbatical year. Do you have any special projects you are currently working on?**

I finished a book on technology and educational reform called *Learning in the Cloud: How and Why to Transform Schools with Digital Media* and I have just launched a new project on digital reading. I am interested in ways that reformatting digital texts can make them more comprehensible to struggling readers everywhere but particularly to second language readers. I think this overlaps with autonomous learning as well because it is hard for language learners to read second-language texts, especially academic texts and I think some of the types of scaffolding and reformatting available on digital devices have a lot of potential for allowing students to be able to tackle those texts more easily.

**What do you mean by reformatting and how does it help?**

When low-level students read something they can become completely lost as to the syntactic structure of the sentence - and you can tell when they read out loud as it often comes out as a monotone. So, students may get lost in complex structures and paragraphs and they end up moving back and forth between different parts of the text trying to derive meaning.

Well, there is a software programme called Live Ink ([liveink.com](http://liveink.com)) that takes a block-formatted text and reformats it almost like a poem with syntactic breaks so that each line is very short but it is broken at places that give clues to the syntactic meaning. The line breaks are indented at different lengths to give it a cascaded look.

This formatting is called visual-syntactic text formatting and breaks up these big blocks of text. Initial research has shown it allows second language learners to comprehend and retain texts much more easily than they would otherwise, as well as improving their overall reading proficiency.

**So potentially students could apply this to any digital text.**

Actually there already is a free software tool called Clip Read which anyone can download from the Live Ink website, and yes you can take that and be reading an article on the New York Times or a chemistry research paper or whatever. You can cut and paste your text into Clip Read and it will automatically parse the text for you. Some people absolutely swear by it.

I have seen some of the testimonials by people who have used it. The preliminary research has shown that the best readers improve 20% and the worst improve 50%. So, everyone improves but those at the bottom of the scale, and in the US context that means English language learners, children of immigrants and so on, tend to improve the most. This has not been tried in an EFL context yet, but having looked at and tried out the materials this seems tailor made for this kind of context.

**When you say there was an improvement, what do you mean?**

The developers carried out the research but they claim there is a 50% efficiency and it is roughly a 25% increase in comprehensibility and a 20% boost to speed. The most interesting thing is that it supposedly improves your reading proficiency even with regular block texts so when students read with this for 50 minutes a week over the course of a year, their scores on regular reading tests improve more than students only using block texts. I think that maybe it has a kind of training effect, in that by learning how language is structured by restructuring a text, the reader knows what to look for. So, I think it is tailored for foreign language learners, especially at university level, because they often have to read quite complex texts like scientific papers that are way beyond them. My intuition is that it will help.

This is the type of thing that would not have been useful 10 years ago because nobody was reading from a screen. But certainly in the United States and several other countries now, the majority of reading is done on a screen. In the US we are getting to the point where more eBooks are being sold than paper versions. And this is just one type of scaffolding, there's text to speech, there's different types of colour coding, there's glosses and lots of other things that can be put in place and all of these have great potential for autonomous learners because there is lots of scaffolding that can be put in place in digital reading that just doesn't exist in traditional reading. These things can help people read texts autonomously that they just would not have been able to read otherwise.

**That sounds absolutely fascinating. Professor Warschauer, thank you very much for talking to me. I look forward to reading more about your research in the future.**

You're welcome.