

Engaging with technologies for language learning: Perspectives on autonomy and motivation

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The title of this talk is intended to highlight a subtle yet significant semantic distinction between ‘language learning technologies’ (as expressed in the theme of the conference) and ‘technologies for language learning’ – i.e. a distinction between technologies pedagogically designed for language learning purposes, and everyday technologies that can be exploited for language learning purposes. While these are not mutually exclusive categories since the latter may subsume the former, the distinction is useful because it points to important psychological differences in how language learners conceptualize and relate to particular technologies, and thus points to differences in the quality of their autonomy and motivation in engaging with these technological resources. For example, when provided with appropriate language practice materials online, learners who are ‘autonomous’ (in the sense of self-motivated or self-determined) will freely engage with these materials to develop their language skills accordingly. Yet the same learners may lack the ‘autonomy’ (in the sense of strategic thinking and know-how) to understand how they can creatively exploit their engagement with various everyday technological affordances for the purposes of developing, practising and using their language skills. Or they may lack the motivation (in the sense of willingness) to allow language learning to suffuse (or interfere with) their everyday personal use of technologies, and thus they may express a different kind of autonomy (i.e. resistance) in this regard. In short, in focusing on how learners engage with technologies for language learning, we are brought to consider some interesting complexities in autonomy and motivation. My aim in this talk will be to explore these complexities from a theoretical perspective, and consider their implications for understanding how to enhance the quality of students’ engagement with technological resources for language learning.

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