

Technology's Impact on SLA: A Response to Bhatia and Ritchie (2009)

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Bhatia and Ritchie (2009) focus on the positive impact of technology, specifically “the potential and promise of technology in shaping and reshaping the direction of research on SLA and in providing a potential testing ground for current theories of SLA” (p. 545). Their enthusiastic assessment, subsequently elaborated from the perspectives of users and researchers, seems intuitively relevant in this age. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge technology's limitations in language education. For example, Bhatia and Ritchie (2009) accurately observe that the emergence of technology is responsible for “the democratization of language teaching” (p. 547) to the degree that it facilitates exposure both to less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) and to almost never taught languages (ANTLs). This democratization emerges as problematic for researchers in that it generates a level of participant assimilation within a technology-driven learning space that tends to obscure not only important inter-learner differences, but also the differential effects on acquisition of technology.

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is observed to help users achieve a certain level of autonomy in their learning and production. For learners, technology might decrease negative affect by promoting “a lowering of anxiety levels, the creation of higher interest, and the stimulation of greater student participation” (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2009, p. 550). Affect in itself, though, seems elusive and complex. For instance, technology probably does not always diminish user anxiety or promote acquisition through facilitative anxiety. More generally, it seems clear that technology without proper implementation could increase debilitating anxiety and negative effect.

In many instances, technology multiplies possible avenues for data elicitation by allowing for greater facility of user production for researchers. Data, and especially naturalistic data, is obtained more easily and more rapidly, due to the pervasiveness of the Internet (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2009). To researchers working on L2 knowledge and processing, technology provides unique benefits. Compared to traditional instructional methodology, technology is argued to enhance data collection both on “qualitative (i.e., information) and quantitative (e.g., speed) aspects of language processing, and the learner's approach to the learning task, [and various other aspects of] learner's linguistic and cognitive skills” (p. 554).

Nevertheless, as suggested by Bhatia and Ritchie (2009), important limitations exist in the relevance of technology to researchers. First, technology has mostly been tested on a restricted demographic, such as university students studying Western languages. Second, empirical researchers working with technology may attach too much weight to unreliable self-reported data, and, conversely, too little weight is likely to be given to the importance of distinguishing among “subjects with similar attitudes and proficiency with technology (e.g., word processing and information search ability)” (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2009, p. 559).

In conclusion, it is important to recognize the advantages that technology bestows upon its users and researchers as technology emerges as a precious tool to be utilized wisely and with discretion. On the other hand, its limitations must be acknowledged so that it can be harnessed effectively by L2 users, practitioners, as well as researchers.

REFERENCE

Bhatia, T. K., & Ritchie, W. C. (2009). Second language acquisition: Research and application in the information age. In W.C. Ritchie, & T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *The new handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 545-565). Bingley: Emerald Group.

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