

## Book Review

---

### **English Learning in the Digital Age: Agency, Technology, and Context**

*Shuang Zeng*

Springer, 2018, 212 pages, 978-981-13-2498-7  
(hardback; publisher's list price \$99.99 USD)

With the rapid growth of educational technologies and an increasing number of initiatives for digital tools to be used in the classroom, the prevailing assumption tends to be that the availability of educational technology equates to the use of these resources by language learners. Consequently, the focus of technology use is often on the capabilities of technologies, rather than on the actual needs and complex behaviours of students. Thus, language learners' agency—the choices they make—can easily be overlooked. In *English Learning in the Digital Age: Agency, Technology, and Context*, Shuang Zeng offers a timely and insightful perspective on technology use by focusing on learners' voices and behaviours in the Chinese undergraduate university context to explore their use and/or nonuse of web-enhanced language learning (WELL) for out-of-class English language learning. What is most compelling about the argument made in this book is that students are positioned as agentive users of technology—individuals who make deliberate, informed choices about their use of technology based on their own perceived needs, goals, and interests in their specific learning contexts. Thus, the emphasis is not on the promises of digital technologies for English language learning, but rather, on the realities of actual language learners' (non)use.

This book focuses on a cross-sectional, mixed-methods research study conducted at a university located in the East (Nanjing) and another in the West (Chongqing) of China. Data collection methods included an initial survey phase identifying the patterns of behaviour of WELL use among 1,485 Chinese undergraduate students and a second phase centred on semi-structured interviews with a targeted subsample of 49 participants. The study is rooted in a sociocultural framework to explore how Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' choices and behaviours are mediated by their wider context of language learning in China. The book is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter 1 addresses the scope, purpose, and rationale for the study, and Chapter 2 establishes the background and significance in light of current debates in academic fields surrounding WELL. Chapter 3 provides justification for using sociocultural theory as the conceptual framework, and Chapter 4 describes the research sites, instruments, and procedures. Chapter 5 reports trends in students' actual use of digital tools for English

language learning purposes, whereas Chapter 6 highlights a minority of students who exercised their agency to use WELL in support of their out-of-class language learning. Chapter 7 tackles students' nonuse of WELL—namely, why students were resistant to the use of online technology, and Chapter 8 concludes by summarizing the findings and highlighting the main contributions and implications of the study.

A particularly salient feature of this book is how students' voices are featured and woven throughout. For example, one participant candidly expressed reluctance toward use of digital technologies for language learning:

Reading (English) on the web is like eating instant noodles, it's quick, and you forget it easily, it's not like the book we learn, you will read it several times. You would try to understand and memorise the beautifully written paragraphs. (p. 100)

Another student provided a more straightforward account: "When I'm online, I seldom thought about learning English. When I'm learning English, I seldom thought about the Internet. So I don't use the Internet for learning English" (p. 157). As these quotations illustrate, many students did not welcome or incorporate digital technologies into their English language learning practices. Instead, they often deliberately chose not to make use of these because of a perceived dissonance with their contextual realities, such as institutional policies and technical issues limiting Internet access in school dormitories and national blocking of some Western websites. Moreover, students frequently deemed web resources as irrelevant and inefficient for their immediate need to use English for examination purposes. Consequently, although emerging digital technologies offer language learners increasingly innovative opportunities for social interaction, participation, and collaboration in communicative language learning communities, this does not necessarily indicate that most students' practices are transformed as the majority of students used technology as a means to complete their academic tasks in ways that aligned with their already established English language learning habits.

Thus, Zeng presents a unique angle as this study uncovers the underlying barriers to technology use for language learning purposes by asking "why language learners are (not) doing what they are (not doing)" (p. 37); in other words, highlighting their "capacity to act *otherwise*" (p. 61). The study is positioned within an extensive discussion on sociocultural theory and second language acquisition, which some may consider unnecessarily broad in its scope and detailed in its coverage. Nonetheless, this book problematizes the "'digital native' rhetoric" and a "technological determinist mindset" (pp. 31, 174) by situating students exactly where they should be—at the centre of educational change. Despite the heavy emphasis on English language learning in the Chinese educational system, Chinese undergraduate students typically

have scarce opportunity to utilize the target language for communicative purposes, which WELL use can potentially enhance. Furthermore, regardless of students' frequent use of the web for recreational purposes, they still may be unfamiliar with how to transfer these skills to language learning. Therefore, English language educators need to equip students to use the web for language learning purposes, while providing a genuine need for them to do so by emphasizing the importance of English communicative competence in classroom teaching, assignments, and assessment.

Overall, this book offers a unique perspective on technology use and out-of-school literacy practices in the Chinese educational context, moving educators beyond the "digital native" narrative, which can inhibit effective English language teaching. It also may spark interest to examine the use and nonuse of technology of other groups of English language learners as they may exercise their agency and engage and resist in ways different from these learners based on their own unique learning contexts. By directly listening to and learning from students' voices, institutions may be able to better respond to language learners' authentic needs for use of the internet and equip them to use it more effectively for their own English language learning purposes.

*Tamara Mae Roose*

### *The Reviewer*

*Tamara Mae Roose* is a PhD student in Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University, where she specializes in Foreign, Second, and Multilingual Language Education. Her research interests focus on second language academic literacies, asset-based pedagogies, and the intercultural dimensions of English language teaching and learning.