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Interconnected Learning and Teaching in the Post-Pandemic Era. Trends and Challenges in Teaching Foreign Languages

Oana-Maria FRANȚESCU
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi

In the span of less than five years the entire society had to un-learn and re-learn how to keep its course steady. Diseases and wars share an effect on the world: they force evolution in thinking and practice by sharpening the needs of various parts of society and speeding up the entailing solution to those needs. The trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic made us all become aware of fresh learning needs all across the globe, in all walks of life, and for all age groups. The pandemic found us debating issues of cultural awareness and cultural communication in teaching foreign languages as if we were taking for granted all the first six levels of Maslow's pyramid of needs, but four months into the pandemic we were thrown back to the base of the pyramid to cater to the learners' physiological needs while trying to keep up with the little teaching that could be done between safety precautions.

Some of that teaching was groundbreaking in means or purpose, some was happening on the fringes of the law, some was done against daunting financial burdens, and all of it was informing a new educational interest in the new concept of *literacies*, different from the old meaning of being able to read and write. With the pandemic, literacies intertwined with an enumeration of skills considered to be relevant for the 21st century apart from cultural awareness: creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, autonomy etc. (Pegrum 9) But *digital literacies* in particular were quickly identified as the missing chain in the attainment of the other, more conventional skills, and this new area of learning was not confined to learners,

but pervaded various levels of teacher training and professional development. Multimodal literacy is nowadays one of the several *sine-qua-non* literacies in the life of any young person, and teachers have a new role in connecting the basic ability to read (*language-related literacy*) with the revolutionary ability to code meaning (*code literacy*), to interpret data (*information-related literacy*), and to interact with other fellow-coders (*connection-related literacy*) as part of the roles they play in their profession and in society in general.

The highest need in Maslow's pyramid, self-actualization, can find its literacy counterpart in what Doug Belshaw called, as early as 2014, *remix*, the "heart of digital literacies." (Belshaw 77) Now, since the pandemic and with the rise of artificial intelligence, we know this to mean that learners and teachers alike must learn how to preserve the authenticity of their expression in the digital environment. Languages can be learned, human communication can be accelerated and enhanced, and digital tools can be used in the process, but everything must be done with *reverence* (Belshaw 84), for this is the essential difference between machines and humans in the way they inter-relate.

In the wake of Large Language Models, it is not our mission to advance a term for genuine communication between humans and machines on an equal footing. Even some parts of a language teacher's job can and will be automated in the future, and computers have already acquired a good level of linguistic and communicative competence to the extent where it can support human learners of foreign languages. But, as Marcel Danesi shows, *blending* in foreign language education is not just some modern idea of combining human tutoring and artificial intelligence for the benefit of a digitally literate learner. This cooperation only happens withing a framework of consideration for the human authentic expression. AI must remain a tool under the human teacher's supervision. (Danesi 124)

This issue of *LINGUACULTURE* is special in that it brings to the forefront the very preoccupation for reverence and authenticity in teaching foreign languages in a digital environment and with a focus on cultural sensitivity. All the papers in this issue were presented in the first international conference on language teaching, *Interconnected Learning and Teaching in the Post-Pandemic Era. Trends and Challenges in Teaching Foreign Languages*, organized in Iasi, Romania, in November 2023. The conference was a splendid opportunity to exchange know-how and assess the strengths and challenges of a technological

environment which, while abundant in offering endless combinations of content and ways to leverage it for learners, raises important questions about standardization, authenticity, accessibility, ethics, achievement, and relevance. The conference made it a special point to invite language teachers and teacher trainers of as many languages as possible from those represented at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi in order to entice discussions about teaching the "obvious" languages (i.e., most frequently used, e.g., English, French, German, Italian, Spanish etc.), but also the niche languages (e.g., Norwegian, Polish etc.) present among the university's programmes, especially since digital environment varies with the languages.

And so, the papers in this issue cover aspects of teaching or assessment in main and minority languages, which we believe to be an achievement in itself. It is a particular strength of this issue's contributions that, where their authors bring the ITC tools to the foreground, they make un unbiased approach to the merits of these tools in teaching foreign languages. While fully aware of arguably the upper hand technology can have in many repetitive processes involved in teaching and learning even a decade after the launch of what is known as the Dogme ELT philosophy and in full bloom of teaching unplugged (Meddings & Thornbury 23), the authors state the irrefutable return to the most important asset in the classroom, the learners themselves.

Reading materials turned digital are there to open new routes of scaffolding on language learning at very refined levels of customization, as **Aba Carina Pârlog**'s paper shows. Literature Digital Reading tools are presented not only as a new toy fot teachers, but also a means for learners to gain autonomy in training communication skills and achieving accuracy with support potentially coming from teachers or even parents, which considerably widens the potential help in learning and interaction, not to mention the cooperation between trainer and family.

Alina Bruckner and **Alexandra Chiriac** boldly open the discussion on the merits of artificial intelligence in the foreign language classroom. The timing of this paper could not be more appropriate when fear and doubt loom over assignment-riddled projects for learners of all ages, but the authors pre-empt these hesitations with a shift of perspective on the teacher's role. They show how embracing a higher authority role overlooking the AI-assisted learning frees the

teacher from manually creating customized materials, which actually creates the premises for real-time interaction in class.

With **Alexandra Cotoc** and **Ioana Mudure-Iacob**'s paper the discussion veers towards gamification, another hot topic for foreign language teaching, especially since the study presented in the paper was conducted on adult learners reading linguistics, not children. The authors present a more complex and more engaging version of group learning, the digital educational escape rooms, designed to increase the learner's focus, cooperation and drive in attaining their learning goals. The value of such tools is also studied in detail from the very encouraging response to the language lessons, from content to impact.

Another paper with a strong focus on technological tools comes from **Diana Lățug** and **Adina Lung**. It is rare that studies expand to samples of students from both secondary and tertiary settings, as it is to scrutinize more than one foreign language, even one language considered a minority in the general picture of foreign language education (Norwegian), as the authors well point out from the beginning. However, the study finds the striking similarity in the impact of these tools (online and offline) on all the sampled age groups, which goes on to show that ITC is no longer a conditioned presence in language learning (regardless of the language), but a matter of balance between both learning environments (online and offline) with any literate learner.

In **Carina Brânzilă**'s study, ITC tools feature to showcase a less known pathway for developing critical thinking in students. Derived from decision-making practices in business, sentiment analysis done via software is presented as more than a way to monitor student feedback. Its potential for developing refined analysis skills in language students is highlighted especially as the process becomes available to learners of lower language levels where in conventional teaching (without technology) this would only be possible at higher language levels and with higher order thinking skills.

Elena Velescu walks into the world of ChatGPT to highlight some important advantages in teaching French for Special Purposes. The particular difficulty in teaching the Special Purposes niche of a foreign language is that the teacher must know the domain (Birch-Bécaas & Hoskins 53) in addition to the language. The chatbot represents the more efficient alternative to manually collecting material from a much wider range of professional output, and to adapting it and the accompanying task for class, which the author supports with

a generous range of arguments detailing the skills ChatGPT can assist learners and teachers with.

Three more papers in this issue explore the cultural component in foreign language education. **Mădălina Tvardohlib** draws our attention to a lack of focus on cultural meaning in the teaching materials for adult learners. While admitting the long-settled inconvenient that teaching culture along with the foreign language takes time and is therefore considered inefficient, the author pleads in favour of training students in cultural sensitivity not apart from communication skills, but as part of them. It is encouraging to see a special effort to compensate the lack of suitable class materials by presenting some methods that guide communication to cultural awareness.

Another discussion with cultural repercussions comes from **Antony Hoyte-West**'s study of language certifications. He proposes a comparative exploration of the available certifications for a number of minority Romance languages in Europe in the context of a wider landscape of CEFR standards of assessment for other, better represented languages. This paper contributes a strong cultural pespective on language learning in the sense that the presence, format and perceived impact of these certifications partly explains, and partly informs the need for learning some minority languages from the perspective of educational and professional stakeholders.

Culture takes a strong focus in **Ștefana Iosif**'s paper where she presents an innovative approach called RTTP (Reacting to the Past) derived from teaching history and adapted for students of English especially for the purpose of cultural awareness. This contribution, just like the previous ones in this issue, emphasizes the crucial role culture has in shaping communication in language education. The didactic games the author describes in detail are meant to draw the students' attention to the discourse shifts triggered by the social roles and political interests pertaning to a given historical framework.

This issue of *LINGUACULTURE* gathers a fresh diversity of perspectives on the state of foreign language education in the 21st century. It follows a consistent trend in aligning content and method to a cultural interest while tackling the refined challenges of literacies and authenticity. Our contributors' insights represent new pathways for a wave of research that is validated by teaching projects and informs future professional standards in both language teaching and the use of ITCs, artificial intelligence included. They provide

examples of good practices and new reference points in the balance of roles between teachers and learners.

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