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Developing Learners as Global Citizens: Reflections on the Affordances of Digital Pedagogies in Language Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted language education globally. Issues of equity and access to education have emerged in the literature, spotlighting the exacerbation of extant socio-economic divides in education access and attainment. Among these issues was a global online pivot, with educators and students turning to online education and distance learning. Though largely a response to the immediate challenges faced in the education sector, this transition to distance and online education offered opportunities for language education to respond to the emerging challenges and future needs in global education. With this in mind, this paper argues that distance and online education can facilitate holistic, intercultural, and immersive language learning by offering opportunities for personalised and autonomous learning, and for creating digitally enhanced intercultural spaces to engage with and address global issues in language education.

Key words: COVID-19; crisis pedagogy; digital pedagogy; online education; intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Perennially, language education is caught amid changing winds and rests upon shifting sands (Marckwardt, 1972). The reflexivity and evolution in language education is largely owing to broader changes in the role and remit of education, globally, and the permeation of these changes within language education, primarily in English language teaching contexts (Tuzlukova et al. 2017). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, language education was on a clear, if not dynamic, trajectory in which the future of the practice would have required that teachers equip learners with linguistic and disciplinary knowledge, as well as social, political, economic, ecological, and digital competencies needed to address the unique concerns of the future (OECD, 2018). Digital pedagogies were on the horizon (Carrier & Nye, 2017); however, it has been noted that, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now an increased interest in the topic (Väättäjä & Ruokamo, 2021).

The international COVID-19 pandemic has had a sustained impact on education globally and the issues that have arisen cannot be understated. Emerging trends in growing inequities and gaps in access and attainment have demonstrated that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds have been impacted more negatively by the pandemic (The Edge

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Foundation, 2020). In higher education, limitations on international student mobility have restricted opportunities for supported international travel (Koris et al. 2021) and owing to the decline in service industries and casual labour, student jobs, required by many to sustain their education, have been decimated (The Edge Foundation, 2020). In the context of language education, COVID-19 has accelerated the ongoing evolution of digital pedagogies with educators pivoting to distance and online teaching as a means to continue to engage with learners (Sullivan, 2020). However, as with other negative impacts of the pandemic, this evolution has not necessarily been a smooth one. Largely a response to the immediate challenges faced in the education sector, perspectives on the efficacy of online learning grew ambivalent among teachers (Subekti, 2021), despite long espoused and recognised advantages and affordances of digital pedagogy occupying the literature – for a detailed review of such affordances, see Section 3. As such, in many ways, the transition to distance and online education shifted the priorities in language education (Vääätäjä & Ruokamo, 2021) and led to important work that has disentangled crisis responses and digital pedagogies (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

The issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding, arguably, there is scope for digital pedagogies to address existing issues of equity and access in language education, specifically for supporting the development of intercultural competences. In this view, this paper considers the opportunities that digital pedagogies afford language education to respond to the emerging challenges and future needs in global education, arguing that distance and online education can facilitate holistic, intercultural, and immersive language learning and create digitally enhanced intercultural spaces for engaging with and addressing global issues.

Thus, this paper exposes the past, present, and future of language education, in Section 2, with a view to situating perceptions on movements in language education before, leading up to, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, the article documents the online pivot and crisis-response to online pedagogy at this time. Subsequently, Section 3 discusses the barriers and affordances of online language learning for responding to global educational needs, and argues that language learning and digital pedagogies can facilitate the creation of intercultural spaces for language learning and, in doing so, can address emerging and existing needs in global education. Finally, Section 4 concludes this paper, offering closing reflections, caveats, and suggestions for future directions in the field.

2. Language education: a perennial state of evolution

Language education has undergone numerous changes during its short, documented history. The traditional grammar translation and classical methods centred on written language and sought to develop language competence through the translation of the knowledge of written grammatical forms (Howatt & Smith, 2014). While the sentence-level and written language focus was largely surpassed in the 1870s, it is of note that facets of the grammar translation method are seen to maintain value for low-proficiency teachers (Cook, 2010). Successive movements, such as the natural approach (Sauveur, 1874), and the direct and Berlitz methods (Berlitz, 1911), moved to focus on natural conversations for language learning. Notably, it was at this time that language teaching began to move away from the first language in the language classroom, owing to the relegation of the grammar translation method. From the 1920s, an increased importance was placed on evidence for informing practices (Howatt & Smith, 2014). With evidence-informed practices becoming more prominent, methods such as the oral method

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(Palmer, 1921), the Situational Approach (Hornby, 1950), the Comparative Method (Lado, 1957) and the audiolingual method (Lado, 1957) invoked behaviourism and language analysis for facilitating learning.

This pattern of evolution continued in the 1970s with the development of Hyme's communicative competence (1972) and the notional-functional syllabus (Wilkins, 1976), both of which have shaped important developments in contemporary communicative language teaching, task-based learning, and the lexical approach (Lewis, 1993). The growing collection of methods and approaches led to the so-called post-method period (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Prabhu, 1990) in language education leading Larsen-Freeman to develop the concept of principled eclecticism in language education (2000). Of course, there are many other methods and approaches that arose during this time that have not been mentioned here, such as the Series Method (Gouin, 1892), Suggestopedia (Lozanov, 1978), The Silent Way (Gattego, 1972), and Dogme/Teaching Unplugged (Thornbury 2000) that demonstrate the rich tapestry of methods and approaches in language education. Overall, what this snapshot of history demonstrates is that methods and approaches in language education are in a process of sustained evolution, reflecting Marckwardt's (1972) designation of language education as being impacted by ever changing winds and shifting sands.

Among its more recent evolutions, language education, and education more generally, has been guided by future uncertainties. Preparing learners for the unknown and the unexpected is central to the OECD's (2018) view on the future of education. Given that the challenges of the future will span societal, economic, political, and ecological domains, it is argued that "developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable people to contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future" is critical for contemporary education. Similarly, in the National Association of Colleges and Employers report (2015), the skills that learners need to develop to solve future issues are outlined with foci on teamwork, decision-making, communication, organisation, ability to analyse and process information, and technological skills. All of these graduate skills are overlaid with a need to develop an understanding of global and social responsibility in our learners. In language education, interest in meeting these needs has arisen owing to the view that the transdisciplinary, linguistic, and cultural nature of language education (Liddicoat 2018) creates a space for the development of skills and knowledge in language learners (Tuzlukova et al. 2017). Tuzlukova et al. (2017, p.617) summarise this view well in stating that:

Pragmatic concerns for addressing dynamic change in the work environment are highlighted in studies relating to education for the 21st century. [...] Traditional ways of imparting knowledge are no longer adequate to ensure that students graduating are able to meet the demands of the workforce, [making this an] exciting time to be a teacher and a learner.

This view is similarly echoed by Liddicoat (2018, p.25) who argues that:

Language education is inevitably at an intersection of linguistic, cultural and epistemological possibilities and so highlights the need to include multilingual practice and openness to the diverse epistemologies created and communicated through languages in understanding the transdisciplinary individual.

Embedded in these movements is the role of digital pedagogy. Digital pedagogy is not a new facet of language education and in recent years, interest in this topic has been growing (Carrier & Nye, 2017). From a broad perspective, digital pedagogy pertains to the teaching and learning

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language with technology and draws on research from fields such as data-driven learning (Pérez-Paredes, 2019); educational technology (Thorne & May 2017); and (I)CALL – (intelligent) computer-aided language learning (Curry & Riordan, 2021), for example. However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, a notable shift or pivot to online teaching and learning has positioned the all-encompassing concept of digital pedagogy as the primary issue of interest to researchers and practitioners in language education (Vääätäjä & Ruokamo, 2021). This shift is intriguing and generates a number of questions surrounding the future of language education research and practice, the first of which is:

- What impact has COVID-19 had on language education?

The following section moves to answer this question with a view to understanding the incongruences between crisis and digital pedagogies.

2.1 COVID-19 and the education pivot

The COVID-19 pandemic has had myriad effects on education globally. Issues of equity and justice have been exacerbated and parallel economies, such as youth employment, have been decimated, putting education at risk for those who rely on such income to support their studies (The Edge Foundation, 2020). According to The Edge Foundation (2020), mental health conditions have worsened among students, children from better-off households are spending 30% more time each day on educational activities than are children from the poorest fifth of households, and immediate concerns raised during the pandemic pertained to the growing attainment gap among disadvantaged students. To address these issues, calls were made by The Edge Foundation (2020) to widen access to private and online tuition during and after school closure. Interestingly, while the OECD (2020) reports that online platforms were used in nearly all OECD and partner countries, there was a perceived marked and negative impact of digital pedagogies on the development of learners' intercultural competences.

This may appear somewhat surprising given that technology has been seen to play a critical role in engaging learners in authentic communities (Chapelle, 2003) and exposing learners to the culture in the language classroom (O'Dowd, 2019). Evidently, there is an incongruence between the perceptions of learners in the OECD report (2020) and extant research on intercultural competences (O'Dowd, 2019; Zhang & Zhou, 2019). This incongruence is arguably owing to the context in which OECD's (2020) study took place – the COVID-19 pandemic – and the pedagogies most commonly used by teachers during this time – crisis pedagogies (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). The overnight pivot to online and distance learning must be understood as what it was: a shift to digital teaching where learners and teachers often went without training, supports, and adequately equipped virtual spaces to engage in teaching and learning. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020, p.8) identify the pivot to online teaching as a crisis-response noting that the:

crisis-response migration methods adopted by universities are limited to delivery media without taking cognizance of effective online education theories and models. Thus, the crisis-response migration due to the pandemic should not be equated with effective online education [...] but rather be seen from the perspective emergency remote teaching platforms.

It has become important for the field to consider how one might disentangle digital pedagogies from crisis pedagogies in order to investigate, rigorously, the affordances of digital pedagogies

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for language education. Therefore, the following section unpacks the current state of the art in digital pedagogy, while reflecting on emerging research on crisis pedagogies in language education. In doing so, this paper addresses the following question, arguing that digital pedagogies offer recourse to achieve aims concerning globally and socially engaged citizens:

- Does the shift to focus on online and digitally enhanced teaching and learning inhibit the development of globally and socially engaged citizens in the language classroom?

3. Disentangling crisis and digital pedagogies: Affordances of online language learning

Be it digital pedagogy, educational technology, or language technology, research in these fields has provided insight into the established affordances of so-called digital pedagogies in language education. Earlier work positioned digital pedagogies as pedagogies defined by the goal to emulate face-to-face language classroom practices (McCarthy, 2016) guided by the goodness of the fit between the technology and the pedagogical aim (Selwyn, 2011). In reviewing the ways in which digital pedagogies have been seen to support effective language learning, Wichadee (2017) reports that learners who have engaged in online blended learning outperform those who study in traditional, face-to-face contexts and learners have been found to exhibit more participation online (Croxtton, 2014; Power & St-Jacques, 2013). Online learning has also been seen to support learner autonomy (Curry & Riordan, 2021), be motivating (Abdelhafez & Abdallah, 2015), and support vocabulary learning using augmented reality (Solak & Cakir, 2015). The use of bite-sized and mobile learning has increased accessibility (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Moreover, technologies can afford personalized and adaptive learning (Kerr, 2016) and the Internet has been found to be an effective tool for creating immersive virtual spaces for working across virtual communities and cultures (Chapelle, 2003).

However, challenges also emerge when applying digital pedagogies to language learning. The concept of the digital divide (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018) is echoed in the growing inequities in access to online education in COVID-19 (The Edge Foundation, 2020), where, eschewing the notion of the digital native, Hockly and Dudeney (2018) see the divide occur at socio-economic strata. Furthermore, the misuse of technology (Kerr, 2015), the growing challenges in disentangling modes of delivery, technologies, and user experience (Claypole, 2016), and the question of data and ethics in learner use of technology (Sharkey, 2016) all signal potential hazards in digital pedagogies for language learning.

Much of the existing literature in digital pedagogies contrasts face-to-face and online practices with a view to unpacking their effectiveness and arguing that pedagogies should guide the use of technology (cf. Fox, 2003; Fullan, 2013). A differing and quite pertinent perspective is offered by Tsui and Tavares (2021) who argue that one ought not to consider the relationship between pedagogy and technology as dichotomous and unidirectional. Rather, they are synergetic in that they can serve to shape one another. This reflexivity affords creative and contextualised perspectives on technology for language teaching and learning that take into account the locality, the student body, and the learning aims (Curry, forthcoming), for example. Overall, digital pedagogies appear dynamic, with differing views on how they are grounded, theoretically, and a range of affordances and shortcomings associated with the language learning process.

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Despite the evident shortcomings of digital pedagogy, digital pedagogies appear to support the development of learner autonomy, create authentic and culturally immersive online spaces, move beyond geo-political borders, and facilitate intercultural exchange. Reflecting on the crisis pedagogy that is characteristic of language teaching and learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, critiques of the efficacy of online learning at this time are not consistent with earlier literature. This is because, as Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) note, we cannot see pandemic practices as reflective of the affordances of online teaching when the practice itself does not draw on knowledge and expertise in this arena. Therefore, while the OECD report signals that the intercultural experiences are not replicable in online spaces, much literature on digital pedagogies does not support this view (cf. O’Dowd, 2019). Having drawn a distinction between digital and crisis pedagogies, the next section centres on the ways in which the development of teachers’ digital pedagogies can serve to move beyond crisis pedagogies while simultaneously creating recourse for the development of learners as global citizens.

3.1 Online language learning as a space for developing intercultural competence

Recognising that the perceived deficits in digital pedagogies during the COVID-19 pandemic are not representative of documented effective practice in online teaching and learning, there is an evident need to support the development of teachers’ digital pedagogy competences (Al Abiky, 2021). However, this does not mean that extant aims in developing intercultural competence and global citizen must be abandoned. In responding to future needs, education must equip learners with general and transferable skills and graduate attributes in order to develop global citizens and transdisciplinary individuals. This paper argues that despite the view that digital pedagogy falls short in the regard (OECD, 2020), there is adequate scope for online learning to address these concerns. Specifically, this paper spotlights two approaches in language education, virtual exchanges, and virtual reality, to argue that online language learning can create virtual spaces for intercultural engagement that allow students to move within and across cultures and communities and to develop intercultural competences.

Virtual exchange or telecollaboration refers to the use of technology to bring learners together from different cultures and contexts to collaborate and interact (O’Dowd 2019). Typically occurring online, virtual exchanges seek to connect learners from different cultures, contexts, and linguistic backgrounds to facilitate a cultural exchange. In the context of language education, it is of note that while the impact of virtual exchange on language proficiency remains somewhat inconclusive (Schenker, 2017), clear benefits of virtual exchanges have been identified. These include their value for raising learners’ interest in different cultures (O’Dowd & O’Rourke, 2019), developing global citizenship (O’Dowd, 2019), placing culture at the centre of the language learning process (Schenker, 2013), and developing digital literacy skills (Hauck, 2019). Therefore, while OECD (2020) and Koris et al. (2021) argue that a lack of international mobility has undermined the development of intercultural and global learners, it is clear that virtual exchanges offer means to overcome this issue. Moreover, as educational mobility typically affords opportunity for intercultural exchange for the more privileged members of society (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013), virtual exchange also offers intercultural opportunities for those learners less likely to be able to travel for study.

Another means to support intercultural engagement in digital language learning arises in the use of virtual reality. Virtual reality typically involves using technology to immerse oneself in virtual environments. Virtual reality can manifest in 3D recordings (Pedersen & Koumaditis, 2020), annotated virtual spaces (Driver et al. 2020), and fictitious online spaces

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for synchronous engagement (Parmaxi, 2020) and, owing to its flexibility, virtual reality has made inroads in medical education (Meyer, 2020), tourism (Adachi et al. 2020), and, of interest here, language education (Parmaxi, 2020). In language education, virtual reality has been seen to increase learners' senses of cultural involvement significantly (Cheng et al. 2017). It has also fostered learners' interest in virtually presented places, and in the context of Chinese language learning, for example, 'VR tools offered an authentic context for Chinese language learning, sparked interest in the virtually presented locales, and encouraged students to further explore the target culture' (Xie et al., 2019 p.251). This is because virtual spaces can allow learners to navigate cities in which their language of study is used, engage with linguistic landscapes, and gain an insight into life in different parts of the world. In this view, Lin and Lan (2015, p.494) capture a critical affordance of virtual reality for language learning:

Given that FL [foreign language] learners often do not have ready access to a suitable environment in which to practice and use the target language, virtual reality can overcome this difficulty by providing an immersive and authentic environment to socially interact.

What these two brief overviews of research on virtual exchange and virtual reality demonstrate is that before the educational pivot to online teaching and learning, there was a growing body of evidence that suggests that online learning can enhance intercultural exchanges and competences. Therefore, while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have limited intercultural exchange, it is important that this perspective be not causally linked to digital pedagogies. Rather, we must recognise, as Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) do, that the sudden global shift online was undertaken with an understandably limited engagement with theories of online education. From this perspective, the identified future educational needs remain within the reach and remit of online education, and with due consideration and adoption of approaches such as virtual exchange and virtual reality, advances in digital pedagogies may also foster advances in the development of intercultural and global citizens. Critically, this view also responds to Tsui and Tavares' (2021) argument that an openness to technology shaping pedagogies can offer recourse for new and creative means to solve educational challenges.

4. Caveats, closing remarks and future directions

This paper aimed to argue that there is a need to disentangle crisis and digital pedagogies as used in language education domains during the COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, it reflected on the future needs of education, the pivot to online education, and the all-consuming focus on digital pedagogies with a view to understanding whether digital pedagogies can support the development of global and intercultural learners, despite views that intercultural exchange fell in decline while teaching and learning moved online. In reviewing the history of language education theory and practice, language education is a field in perennial evolution. Marckwardt (1972) notes that social and political movements are key agents of change in education and, arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic is such a factor in this ongoing evolution.

The OECD (2020, p.15) note that online platforms were used in nearly all OECD and partner countries during the pandemic, identifying that:

Online learning tools ranged from educational content which students could explore at their own discretion and formalised learning programmes conducted at their own pace, to real-time lessons led by their teachers using virtual meeting platforms.

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This usage reflects the conceptualisation of online learning as a panacea for education during the pandemic (Dhawan, 2020) and echoes The Edge Foundation (2020, p.44) which makes the important note that:

The higher education sector in five-years' time is likely to look very different from the one pre-COVID. We should however consider what features of the higher education sector that we would like to retain but also consider what might have changed for the better, not least their increased engagement with their local communities.

Noting the cited negative outcomes of the pandemic in education, globally, as discussed in Section 3, the view that certain pandemic practices may be worth maintaining is worthy of interrogation and reflection moving forward.

Given the globality of the issue, there are some caveats to the affordances of digital pedagogies, notably referring to the digital divide (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018). There is a plurality to language teaching contexts and not all contexts will necessarily be aided by changes guided by technology, at least not in the same ways. Friedman's *The World is Flat* (2006) discusses how technology creates a more equal world in which information is available to all. Arguably, this is an overly simplistic view, as the world is in fact not flat. Critical research on teaching in low-resource contexts (cf. Motteram, 2019 who discusses how videoconferencing can support teacher development in challenging contexts and Mbodj et al. 2013 who offers guidance for teaching in low resource contexts) makes clear that technological divides occur nationally and internationally. Therefore, while advances in digital pedagogies and globalised views of education continue to be made, consideration must also be given to contexts in which these advances cannot be applied.

These caveats notwithstanding, and as this paper has argued, distance and online education can facilitate holistic, intercultural, and immersive language learning and create digitally enhanced intercultural spaces for engaging with and addressing global issues. While online and distance education continue to grow amid this global pandemic, it is important that teachers' attention be drawn to the difference between crisis and online pedagogies, and that opportunities for development be created to help teachers realise the many affordances of online language teaching and learning for developing intercultural competence.

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