

Shifting future: Language teaching today and tomorrow

Gabriella Kovacs ^{*1}, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania

Imola Katalin Nagy ², Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania

Eniko Biro ³, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania,

Suggested Citation:

Kovacs, G., Nagy, I. K., & Biro, E. (2021). Shifting future: language teaching today and tomorrow. *International Journal of New Trends in Social Sciences*. 5(2), 66-72 <https://doi.org/10.18844/ijntss.v5i2.5475>

Received August 22, 2021; revised October 19, 2021; accepted December 17, 2021.

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zehra Ozcinar Ataturk Teacher Training Academy, Lefkosa, Cyprus

©2021 Birlesik Dunya Yenilik Arastirma ve Yayıncılık Merkezi. All rights reserved.

Abstract

With the present pandemic, a sudden shift away from classrooms has changed the focus of language teaching. New sources, methods, and techniques had to be employed, generating unanticipated changes both for language teachers and language learners. This paper aims to describe the future of language education with the presentation of possible scenarios embedded into the course of paradigm shifts in language teaching. The study analyzes those events, processes, and tendencies which may carry predictive value for the future of language teaching. Those changes which have emerged due to online education, using focus groups and interview-based qualitative research methods for data collection are defined. According to the research results, the future of language teaching and learning is going to be based on four pillars and increased autonomy, which refers to individually tailored methods and contents during online education.

Keywords: Future; language teaching; online education; qualitative research.

¹ ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Gabriella Kovacs, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania
E-mail address: kovagabi@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Online education has suddenly advanced the majority of language teachers to digital natives (Creighton, 2018). They have had to get acquainted with the use of digital tools, programs, and platforms. However, technology has undoubtedly developed and will continue to develop language learning opportunities. Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), various cloud providers (Google Drive, Dropbox, etc.) are also providing better technologies for language learning which “has not only brought many conveniences to human life but also become one of the important contents of teaching reform in the education industry” (Wang, 2019: pp 395). “The spaces for language learning have similarly expanded to hybrid, online, distance learning, and outside language class learning frontiers” (Wang & Winstead, 2016: pp 9).

Nevertheless, the possibilities of augmented (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are already knocking on the door of everyday users and language learners: all you need is a special headset, and you can already enjoy the rich possibilities of immersion language learning in a foreign language, in an environment where anyone can “pick up” the language. This novel technology “offers the possibility of learning that is more personalized, flexible, inclusive, and engaging. It can provide teachers and learners with tools that allow us to respond not only to what is being learnt, but also to how it is being learnt, and how the student feels” (Luckin et al., 2016: 11).

Although advances in technology seem to offer wonderful opportunities, the method of language learning may not change radically. Technology will not yet guarantee fluency in a language, but it can make the job of learning a language more attractive (Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020). When involved in online teaching, with proper language teacher guidance, students can choose between methods and technologies, customize language learning, which greatly increases its effectiveness. However, a significant disadvantage remains, and the evolution of the world shows that this will continue to be the case due to social segregation. Not everyone has equal access to technical means; they cannot catch up with their better-off peers. This is still the case today, and this trend will not change (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

As a result of the epidemiological measures introduced in the second semester of spring 2020, the teaching and learning processes went online almost entirely in most universities and schools (Unger & Meiran, 2020). In terms of language learning and teaching, this meant using different online educational platforms and interfaces. In our study, we have tried to find an answer to the question that slowly but surely pervades the years of post-communicative language teaching: can we talk about a new paradigm of language teaching? There remains a need to capture and explore the future of language teaching by analyzing the evident or latent changes in the present, and the new didactic situations generated by the epidemic situation.

1.1. Purpose of study

A fundamental feature of the last decades has been the radical and very rapid change of the material world associated with the changing worldview, thanks to which technology has become irrevocably a part of everyday life. Therefore, at first glance, it seemed that it would not be difficult for young people to accept and integrate digital forms of education into the framework of everyday life. This paper aims to describe the future of language education with the presentation of possible scenarios embedded into the course of paradigm shifts in language teaching.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection tool

Our data collection methods have relied on focus group analysis (students as participants) and questionnaires (students and university lecturers as participants). With this premise, a set of questions was designed to study students' and university lecturers' (language teachers') opinions about online education and the future of language learning, reflecting both on the pros and cons of the classroom (on-site) situation, and on the advantages and disadvantages experienced during online education. Furthermore, we hypothesized that learner autonomy had also undergone a significant change, presumably the language learning situation required more independence from the language learner. We were curious about how they envision the future of language learning and language teaching; what elements would be transferred from the current language learning and teaching methods to the near and distant future, which has already become a thoroughly researched area (Foster, 2019). Moreover, we investigated the causes of difficulty in online language learning, whether the situation required more or less time and energy in terms of the language learning process.

Finally, we were also interested in the use of language teaching programs and applications, and the participants had to motivate the extent to which they used these tools and techniques and whether they considered them applicable in an on-site classroom situation. Another set of questions was designed for university lecturers (language teachers), based on similar aspects, asking about the advantages and disadvantages of classroom and online teaching, student autonomy, the future of language teaching, the most relevant difficulties in online language teaching, the probable future use of apps in on-site classroom situations, etc.

2.2. Participants

The students answered the questions partly during a focus group of 6 participants, within the framework of an online group interview. An additional 5 students as participants in the study filled in the online questionnaire, resulting in fairly similar answers in both groups. Language teachers, a total of 8 university lecturers, answered the questions anonymously by filling in the online questionnaire. In their case, the answers showed a varied picture. All data were recorded at the end of the online academic year in 2020, at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, in Romania, which also ensured that participants had enough experience to provide detailed responses.

2.3. Data Analysis

Responses of the participants were analysed with the help of content analysis, based on the above-mentioned categories, some of the most relevant excerpts and answers from the interviews and online questionnaires are included in the presentation of the analysis.

3. Results

According to the students' answers (to the first four questions) on-site (classroom) language, learning situation has several advantages compared to online education, the most important of which are: eye contact, active participation, and interaction, as well as physical classroom presence. According to the data, the teacher-student relationship is more personal and alive, and student-student interaction (group work, conversation) is also highlighted in an on-site educational situation. The subjects listed the following disadvantages of the on-site language learning situation in comparison with the online situation: increased pressure on students; distraction of the teacher, thus slowing down personal progress; while teachers

cannot pay attention to everyone at once, individual development becomes slower. Interestingly, they also complained about their divided attention, the online situation is not favourable, participants not being able to focus on a given task; distractions of their home environment hinder the learning process. During the focus group discussion, it was suggested that setting boundaries (whether physical or methodological) would be key in the future. One student strongly expressed the view that there were no disadvantages of on-site language learning situations: *I support classroom language learning.*

During the online teaching period, students were able to experience the benefits of this new method, such as progress at their own pace and increased motivation. Another student stated that in an online classroom situation the degree of failure or even the incidence of failure was lower: *They do not offend, and you do not feel bad if you mess something up in class*, therefore anxiety was reduced. It seems that online education perhaps allowed more space for personal, self-scale development, students perceived it as more customized: *Personal development gets more emphasis.* They also perceived online classroom opportunities to be much more creative, had instant access to any website, boldly searched for information, and were able to incorporate it immediately into the learning process. Disadvantages of the on-site language learning situation can also be the advantages of online education, such as better management of the time allotted for the task or the use of online dictionaries and translator software, as they provide immediate help and the opportunity to clarify the meaning of unknown lexemes. However, to maximize benefits, foreign language teachers should be aware of the limitations and provide adequate guidance to their students (Williams, 2006).

For example, the classroom provided by the Google Suite facilitates the systematic teaching-learning process in several ways, which students would be happy to transfer to the on-site classroom situation; makes it easier for them to manage tasks and retrieve information. There is a need to be more digitally prepared from now on to make the most of the opportunities offered by technology.

The disadvantage of an online language class is precisely that it is not a form of education that students are used to: *It is better to attend the class properly, we have been used to it for years, it was difficult to pay attention at first.* Concentration, disabilities in verbal communication, or lack of motivation can be a problem: *Students are more likely to neglect preparation, repetition, lack a sense of duty, or experience problems with an online connection.* Sometimes the poor quality of the Internet connection impaired the efficiency of the language class, they could not follow the oral explanation. Another problem was the lack of body language, of paralinguistic elements, which was to the detriment of the new knowledge to be acquired. Thinking about online education, participants also stated that this situation caused an incredibly significant social-educational segregation.

The answers to the 5th question (*In your opinion, comparing the classroom and online situation, did you experience more independence and responsibility during your language learning?*) show that online language teaching significantly increased student autonomy in the learning process, the answers uniformly suggest that digital education has increased the propensity for independence. This is indicated, for example, by the following answer: *In my opinion, I have learned to work independently, but I also consider group works important.* This is all the more important as in recent years there has been less and less emphasis on students' responsibility and role in didactic processes, and less has been said that knowledge/language is not only a continuous input but a result of student learning and work process, which is also a matter of individual attitude and responsibility.

Question 6 refers to the future of language teaching (*In your opinion, how will the language learning of the future develop? (e.g., skills, methods, tools, whether apps can help and why?)*). Almost without exception, students emphasized the role of apps and did not address future changes regarding skills or methods (probably because the presence of technical gadgets is easier to incorporate into their worldview,

while changes in attributed meanings of concepts, such as skills or methods, are still intangible or difficult to grasp).

The future of language teaching is most clearly outlined in the following answer: *There are already plenty of apps to help you learn a language. I think the combination of classroom learning and the tools created can lead to a greater degree of development.* According to this, the language learning of the future outlines an on-site learning environment, facilitated by apps, creating more colourful and effective opportunities. However, according to the focus group participants, on-site language learning may not be strictly necessary for the future, as machine translation might make language teaching indispensable. It is conceivable that language teaching will disappear from the school environment, making it fully feasible online, providing appropriate and accessible technical conditions for all.

In online language teaching, the most difficult thing was considered to be talking to a computer and not to a human being: *At first, it was difficult to talk to a computer.* Other difficulties included the problem of maintaining attention or finishing a task. This, in their view, was further aggravated by the fact that a teacher had usually responded immediately to spoken or unspoken questions in the classroom, while attention slipped in online circumstances and there was no answer given.

Most of the answers to the question about the time spent on language learning suggest that students usually spend the same amount of time on it as before: *I think online language learning did not greatly affect my language learning as I improve my English outside of classes (using language learning apps, watching series, reading books).* However, some participants even spent more time learning the language: *Well, I started watching movies in English.* Some people learned less during online schedules: *Less because I do not think it is effective, and I think the interaction disappears.* Participants also mention the role of creativity, which helps their language learning similarly in both learning environments.

The answers to the last question about language teaching programs and apps confirm the assumption that frontal, classroom activity will be still unavoidable in the future, but it will be supplemented by apps developed for language learning: *I use and used apps, I do not think classroom learning can be a complete substitute for a single app.* As expected, only language teaching programs that seek to perform their task not mechanically but by developing communicative language skills will be viable. The possibilities offered by Internet search engines are just as useful. They also predict that the role of the language teacher is changing: on the one hand, software and apps can take over a lot of tasks, and on the other hand, online education makes personalized language teaching more likely, where we can expect much finer tunings and attunements.

The questions for university lecturers represent the same aspects as those formulated for students, with the difference that in addition to language learning, aspects of the educational process are also considered. For the first four questions, respondents highlighted several advantages of the classroom language learning situation, but also some weaknesses. Several participants emphasized the benefits of personal contact, physical presence, the intensity of the emotional factor in the classroom, such as: *you see sparkling eyes or a hazy look.* It is easier to distribute and understand the tasks; there is no need for as much explanation as in the online medium: *there is a variety of techniques to incorporate the development of the four basic skills into the lesson, especially speech.* The disadvantages of the classroom situation compared to online learning are mainly the space constraints. At the same time, in the classroom, the student is less independent, waits for the teacher's instructions and peers' answers, there is less space for individual, independent work, *so better / faster students always have to wait for the slower ones, it is dead time for them,* writes one of our respondents.

Among the advantages of online language teaching the following were mentioned: more time was available for planning lessons, more online resources could be used, and lessons could be made more

colourful, more interesting. It is also more convenient, as you can connect anytime, from anywhere, without travelling. Teachers can give more individual feedback. Regarding the disadvantages of online teaching, one of our respondents points out the overload of tasks and homework given to students. At the same time, they could not have such dynamic lessons as in the classroom; they missed pair work, group work, which became almost impossible, giving way to teacher-centred, frontal education. It is also frustrating that the teacher cannot see the student's reaction and it is difficult to guarantee fair play in evaluation. They all emphasized the lack of face-to-face interaction.

Opinions were divided regarding changes in language learner autonomy. Half of the university lecturer participants said that in an online situation students became more independent, not necessarily regarding language learning, but their digital skills: students acquired and practiced certain skills, e.g., uploading, downloading, sharing materials, using track changes, etc. They also pointed out that the degree of independence was also influenced by age and language level proficiency. In contrast, others noticed a decrease in language learners' autonomy. Some students had difficulty adapting to online forms of work, they needed more help and explanations to find their way around on online interfaces and to understand and complete the tasks. According to one of our respondents, it is a myth that they learn better on their own. They might collaborate and cheat better online.

The 6th question was about the future perspectives in language teaching. According to the majority of the respondents, digital tools are playing an increasingly important role and they also influence the change of teaching techniques and methods. Teachers will also strive to recreate a real classroom environment online. Digital tools are useful and increasingly popular, but they do not replace the teacher. Technical gadgets might help because the current generation likes them, but teacher guidance and mentoring are more important.

The 7th question referred to what will be preserved of the traditional, face-to-face language teaching methods in the future. Here, respondents emphasized the opportunity for live communication and personalized explanations. The answers to the last question revealed what participants considered applicable when they would return to face-to-face teaching. Teachers were able to learn about online applications, and they intend to use some of these in the future, but they stressed that the online medium could not be a substitute for classroom work based on personal presence.

4. Conclusion

There seem to be four basic pillars for future language teaching and learning. One of the pillars is cooperation, collaboration with artificial intelligence. The second pillar is in terms of diversification, content, and methodology, related to space and time, to which the third pillar, creativity, is closely attached. The need for creativity affects all participants in the language learning process and, in addition to its content, also means new challenges for personal interaction. Finally, individualism, individualized methods, and content may form the fourth pillar in the future. However, we believe that with endless possibilities, there may indeed come a time for individualized language learning.

The challenge of the sudden transition to online education brought us closer to understanding what change means, and we have adapted more or less successfully to the new situation. Somehow, a 'window to the future' seemed to open up, and we caught a glimpse of what may be waiting for us in the distant future. Based on the development of language pedagogy and the new experience of digital education, some scenarios for the language teaching of the future can be outlined.

1. Throughout the history of language teaching, the role of the language learner and that of the teacher could never be neglected. In the future the role of the language teacher may be significantly transformed, needing mentor-like or designer qualities, possessing a rich and

applicable knowledge of digital tools, paving the way for language learning with the help of the now emerging artificial intelligence. Although most pedagogical tasks can be solved through online education, the digital curriculum - despite its many advantages - cannot replace didactic processes based on complex interaction and interpersonal relationships. The online form of education is suitable for imparting information, but it may be less suitable for other activities based on a culture of personal relationships, face-to-face interactions, formative elements, educational activities, immediate reactions, para verbal aspects, and other challenges that are implicit in education.

2. Language learning will be expected to diversify, the need for basic communication will be met by artificial intelligence, but we will not be able to meet more complex expectations without human presence, and the role of language teachers will remain necessary. However, this will not necessarily require a classroom medium, future language teachers will guide the language development of learners in a fluid, digital space, supported by artificial intelligence.
3. Nevertheless, the role of creativity is increasing, partly due to student autonomy, and partly due to new demands towards language teachers. This means that creativity is not only about creating, designing the language class environment and tasks but also about nurturing interpersonal relationships.

References

- Beaunoyer, E., Dupéré, S., & Guitton, M. J. (2020). COVID-19 and digital inequalities: Reciprocal impacts and mitigation strategies. *Computers in human behavior*, 111, 106424. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563220301771>
- Creighton, T. B. (2018). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Digital Learners: An International Empirical Integrative Review of the Literature. *Education Leadership Review*, 19(1), 132-140. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1200802>
- Foster, I. (2019). The future of language learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 32(3), 261-269. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07908318.2019.1661154>
- Luckin, R., Holmes, W., Griffiths, M., & Forcier, L. B. (2016). Intelligence Unleashed: An argument for AI in education. <http://oro.open.ac.uk/50104/1/Luckin%20et%20al.%20-%202016%20-%20Intelligence%20Unleashed.%20An%20argument%20for%20AI%20in%20Educ.pdf>
- Moorhouse, B. L., & Beaumont, A. M. (2020). Utilizing video conferencing software to teach young language learners in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 class suspensions. *TESOL Journal*, 11(3). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7460923/>
- Unger, S., & Meiran, W. R. (2020). Student attitudes towards online education during the COVID-19 viral outbreak of 2020: Distance learning in a time of social distance. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science*, 4(4), 256-266. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1271377>
- Wang, C., & Winstead, L. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of research on foreign language education in the digital age*. IGI Global. <https://tinyurl.com/2p826czy>
- Wang, R. (2019, June). Research on artificial intelligence promoting English learning change. In *3rd International Conference on Economics and Management, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (EMEHS 2019)*. Atlantis Press. <https://www.atlantispress.com/article/125910307.pdf>
- Williams, L. (2006). Web-based machine translation as a tool for promoting electronic literacy and language awareness. *Foreign Language Annals*, 39(4), 565-578. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2006.tb02276.x>