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Coda – Language Use, Technology and Professionalisation in Higher Education: Roadmap for Future Research Directions



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Introduction

In this special issue, the links between language use, technology, and professionalisation in Higher Education have been explored through research focusing on interactional competence in professional training, the need to develop Machine Translation skills to engage in new language opportunities in the 21st century, the potential of telecollaboration to foster global competence, and the added-value of mobile technologies for L2 learning and the integration of migrants. We would like to take the opportunity of this brief coda to further this work and highlight other perspectives which are part of our own research agendas and seem to be promising research directions.

More Than Just Language Use: Multimodal Communication and L2 Learning

To start with, drawing on social semiotics, the role of language for meaning making is to be put in perspective. Although the spoken and written linguistic forms are important, they are only part of a

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multimodal ensemble (called “text”). We particularly believe that, with the evolution of contemporary communication sustained by new technologies and media, it is “no longer possible to understand language and its uses without understanding the effect of all modes of communication that are copresent in any text” (Kress, 2000, p. 337). Multimodality thus relies on the interactions between different semiotic resources (or modes including linguistic, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural modes) used to produce meaning. In this regard, according to Bezemer and Jewitt (2018), the key premises of multimodality are that:

- Meaning is made with—and through the use of—different semiotic resources, each offering distinct opportunities, challenges and limitations;
- Meaning making involves the production of multimodal wholes;
- The study of meaning requires to attend to all semiotic resources being used to make a complete whole.

With such growing awareness that meaning production is multimodal by nature, it follows that multimodal communicative competence – as the ability to understand and use various semiotic modes (Kress, 2003) – has become a socially and professionally crucial skill to promote among learners.

These developments about multimodality have important implications for Higher Education as regards L2 learning/training. In fact, instructional designers need to be aware of L2 meaning making as the result of a whole process engaging all the modes present in the learning environments. Knowledge of meaning making possibilities of each mode separately and in combination is essential, since learners make choices based on the ensemble. As argued by Royce (2002), L2 teachers should develop students’ multimodal communicative competence. This call has become urgent today in the web 2.0. era (Early *et al.*, 2015). This means that teachers should have themselves developed such competence—or at least gained awareness of the multimodal nature of communication.

To comply with these requirements, the language department in *Le Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers* (Cnam¹) in Paris, has carried out research to explore L2 English learners and teachers’ awareness of multimodality in a digital (Moodle) learning environment specifically developed by Cnam teachers and offering learners professionally-oriented tasks to be carried out individually. In line with an emergentist approach to L2 learning (N. Ellis, 2008), these digital modules are actually part of a flexible blended environment along with face-to-face group sessions, personal projects to be further presented in class, and optional non-classroom integrated telecollaboration sessions with distant partners. The modules contained several media including videos, H5P interactive content (which contains short videos, reading and listening comprehension activities, flashcards, quizzes, etc.), and PDF files.

The preliminary results of our study (Zoghلامي & Grosbois, 2022a) showed that teachers and learners do not attend to the same media—and by extension the same semiotic modes—for L2 learning. While teachers perceived videos as more efficient than the other media, learners did not seem to favor any medium when it comes to learning English using the digital environment. The other striking result of the study is that none of the PDF files produced by the different English teachers was multimodal, as only the textual mode was used. The absence of multimodality in PDF media can be related to what the teachers experienced in terms of PDF use for L2 learning including during their training. Indeed, our data revealed that teachers were not trained on multimodality and have a limited understanding of what it entails, since they see it as the mere use of support material. Overall, these results show that teachers’ awareness about multimodality and how language can be used for communication purposes

¹ Le Cnam is a unique Higher Education institution dedicated to research and life-long learning in France and where learners are adult professionals mainly.

and learning contexts need to be raised. They indeed should develop what Guichon and Cohen (2016) call a “semio-pedagogical” competence.

Language Teachers and Technology

If technology is claimed to be under-utilized in education (Hew & Brush, 2007; Guichon, 2012), it is mostly due to internal factors (teachers’ confidence and beliefs) as teachers consistently report their lack of knowledge and skills in the use of technology for instructional purposes (Ertmer *et al.*, 2012, Zourou & Torresin, 2019). It is precisely because “[language] teachers feel pressured into using digital technology in the classroom, but often they are not ready to handle the variety of platforms and tools available and are unable to judge which would best serve their purpose” (Zourou & Torresin, 2019 p. 33) that a number of professional development initiatives aimed at language teachers were launched to meet their needs. First, we examined how pre-service teachers specializing in English Language Teaching (ELT) in secondary schools could learn to teach for next-generation education by developing professional skills that are in line with today and tomorrow’s technology-mediated environments. In order to do so, a specific CALL-based ELT training module was introduced in the Initial Teacher Education Master’s program at Sorbonne University’s School of Education (INSPE de Paris) and we were able to show the course was successful in promoting change in student teachers’ beliefs and in helping them develop specific CALL-related skills because it included, as recommended by Ertmer (2005), a combination of personal experiences, vicarious experiences and social-cultural influences (Grosbois & Sarré, 2016). We therefore advocated for a careful blend of action and reflection to be integrated in any CALL-related module in initial teacher education and envisaged to provide a more situated learning experience in the future, especially as regards online language teaching and learning, in line with Slaouti and Motteram (2006) who point out that “teachers need to learn about online learning through online learning” (p. 89).

This was one of the objectives of the CATAPULT project (Computer-Assisted Training And Platforms to Upskill LSP Teachers) which aimed at providing specific training and tools to in-service teachers of languages for specific purposes. One of the main project outputs was indeed a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course with a dual focus: to offer training in both LSP didactics and the integration of digital tools in LSP teaching (Sarré, 2021). If e-learning environments have been shown to be of interest for teacher education (Reeves & Pedulla, 2011), the CATAPULT consortium wanted to identify the specific modalities for such online courses to be efficient and opted for a MOOC format. Even though it is still uncommon today to deliver language teacher education courses in the form of MOOCs (Ibanez Moreno & Traxler, 2016), we designed an LTEMOOC (Language Teacher Education MOOC, Sarré, 2021) and set out to measure its efficacy from 2 perspectives: its impact on the development of key competences and the degree of acceptance by course participants. We were able to show that an online course which combines the xMOOC and cMOOC models is a relevant option for any language teacher education MOOC as the perceived usefulness of the course and of its format by participants, as well as the acceptance rate of the course, were very high (Sarré, Skarli & Turula, 2021). Because instructor presence is an important feature in any efficient LTEMOOC as it has to be felt by course participants, which can be an issue in the case of MOOCs with high numbers of participants, we also explored interaction patterns in the communication between MOOC instructors and trainees drawing on the community of inquiry theoretical framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001) and were able to uncover five different pedagogically efficient patterns of interaction blending social, cognitive and teaching presence (Sarré, Skarli & Turula, 2022).

Finally, another output from the CATAPULT project was the design of an online LSP Community of Practice (CoP) platform (LinguaCoP) to help newly-trained LSP teachers transition from the MOOC to a longer-term online environment offering lifelong professional development opportunities.

Investigating the way LSP teachers engage with the platform is part of the many research avenues still to be explored in the future. More generally, further research is also needed on the ways these relatively new forms of Continuing Professional Development courses impact learning and ultimately teaching in the language classroom.

Towards an International Professional Community of Practice

Following an emergentist approach, L2 learning results from the multiple interactions between factors that are specific to each individual (including cognitive capacities) and those that depend on the context (such as the socio-cultural encounters, exposure to L2, etc.). Learning trajectories are thus inherently individual, particularly for adult learners enrolling in L2 for professional development purposes. Indeed, in addition to distinct L2 proficiency levels, experiences and needs, adults bring along heterogeneous personality traits, academic achievements, work experiences and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. As today's Higher Education settings are increasingly challenged by massification, internationalization and employability concerns, introducing flexibility that takes into account individual trajectories and language needs is therefore essential to foster L2 development among adult professionals (Narcy-Combes, 2018).

Moreover, on their non-linear lifelong learning journey, adults engage in different learning opportunities, be it formal, non-formal or informal. This necessarily raises concerns as regards instructional design and, more particularly, how to lead instructional design efforts in Higher Education. In this respect, Dupuy and Grosbois point out that the “diversity of learning paths sustains the relevance of the shift from instructional design to learning design, a distinction established in the literature to emphasize the importance of learner-centeredness in the design process” (2020, p. 266). This also implies designing meaningful opportunities for learners to model the way they learn in informal settings.

To reconcile these constraints, the language department in Le Cnam conducted a research project to explore the contribution of extra-curricular telecollaboration sessions to foster L2 learning and skills development, taking into consideration the variability of individual learning trajectories (Zoghلامي & Grosbois, 2022b). The case-study results showed that flexibility introduced via autonomy-based telecollaboration not only responds to individual variation in L2 learning and calls for learner-centred designs, but also seems to be appealing and suitable to adult professionals. We further concluded that it would be worth giving a professionalizing dimension to telecollaboration by leveraging communities of practice. Indeed, we believe that, in telecollaborative contexts, learners are likely to develop professional knowledge and competence along with intercultural and (specialized) language skills. Besides, placing the telecollaboration experience within a professionally-oriented community of practice is further in line with the concept of “agentive action” coined by Thorne (2010) as, in such educational settings, learners are expected to engage in specialized online interest communities and to endorse complete responsibility for their linguistic and intercultural (professional) development. We are therefore planning to facilitate the creation of communities of practice for and with adult professionals within our institutional context, all the more so as it is coherent with both the growing importance given to professionalisation in Higher Education and the recent launch of the ‘European universities’ initiative, that is, one of the flagship programmes set up by the European Union to favour campus internationalization, promote staff/student mobility and facilitate the construction of a European Higher Education Area.

European University Alliances

European University Alliances (EUAs) are supranational Higher Education institutions opening up many avenues for scientific research and university pedagogy. One of them has to do with the fact that

the viability of their institutional projects appears to be strongly dependent on considerations relating to language and culture policy. In this institutional model indeed, various temporalities (asynchronous, discontinuous, etc.), spatialities (physical, bimodal, hybrid, virtual, etc.), scales (local, national, continental), languages-cultures and teaching-learning practices (formal, informal, individual, collective, etc.) can be leveraged in unique ways to provide local, national and continental stakeholders (students, teaching, administrative and technical staff, researchers, librarians, etc.) with dedicated social, recreational and pedagogical opportunities. Under such organizing circumstances (Spear & Mocker, 1984), languages and cultures thus appear to be situated at the crossroads of research, education and innovation and, therefore, to be central to the creation and transmission of knowledge.

As a result, with the advent of EUAs, while languages and cultures are anticipated to be both strong drivers of improved educational opportunities and key assets to reshape Europe's Higher Education space, they are also expected to challenge teaching and learning in Higher Education.

In order to address the opportunities, challenges and limitations languages and cultures are likely to bring in their wake in EUAs, we sought to produce a research monograph (Brudermann, in press). This volume views EUAs as thriving research, education, innovation and community-building ecosystems. It particularly highlights how and to what extent, in such ecosystems, languages and cultures are key to (i) supporting the EUAs' curriculum mapping efforts, (ii) enriching campus life, (iii) facilitating student/staff mobility, (iv) enhancing student employability and, ultimately, to (v) preparing students for the 21st century.

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