Inclusive Language Education and Digital Technology

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION
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Inclusive Language Education and Digital Technology

Edited by
Elina Vilar Beltrán, Chris Abbott and Jane Jones

To Gabriela
from Eli

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Introduction

Elina Vilar Beltrán, Chris Abbott and Jane Jones

The Purpose of the Book

Globalization of business, improved travel opportunities and ever grow-
ing means of communication have made it even more necessary for people of
different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate with each
other in a wide variety of contexts and for a wide variety of purposes.
Communication is richer, culturally as well as linguistically and economi-
cally, when it is possible in more than one language; having competence in
languages is also personally enriching and generates enjoyment as well as
growth; as has been shown by McColl (2000: 5): *'foreign language learning, far
from interfering with language development as was once thought, stimulates its devel-
opment, and gains can be detected right across the curriculum'*. This statement
provides a very solid theoretical basis for the implementation of teaching
languages to all pupils and a powerful rationale for the expansion of this
activity within the context of special educational needs (SEN). Digital tech-
nologies are ever more present in our lives and language-teaching contexts
need to exploit the potential of these technologies in order to raise barriers
to learning modern foreign languages (MFL). This book aims to show how
this can be achieved with those individuals for whom language learning is
more challenging, in a variety of contexts and from varying perspectives, and
with a strong focus on the role of digital technologies. This is not an attempt
to summarize developments worldwide, but a UK-based book with illumina-
tive case studies from several European countries. Our exemplar chapters are
not parochial, but carefully chosen to provide illuminative case studies
within an area where very little has been published.

The book is aimed at teachers, advisers and researchers with an interest in the field of MFL teaching and learning, SEN and digital technologies. It may also be of interest to those studying the most effective approaches to inclusive language education. We also address postgraduate students looking for new and inclusive ways to teach MFL and heads and governors with responsibility for SEN/inclusion and for languages, as well as trainee teachers and teaching assistants.

Outline of the Book

The book is divided into two parts. The first part identifies and draws out the key issues of inclusive education, languages and digital technologies. These are not considered separately but are seen as inextricably interwoven, and each chapter takes a different emphasis and a different perspective. Part 2 comprises a set of case studies of current and emerging practices in a range of cultural contexts. The methods and the initiatives to meet those challenges have clear international currency.

Part 1: The Key Issues

Jones, in the first chapter, reviews recent policy changes regarding SEN and MFL, and reminds readers how learners with SEN were, for a long time, excluded from language learning. While the development of the National Curriculum strongly promoted inclusion in MFL, a suitable pedagogy has been elusive and teachers have lacked the necessary training, knowledge and resources in terms of materials and specialist support staff, a situation that is only slowly being remedied. Drawing on the insights and practices of three experienced and committed language teachers, Jones discusses the scope for the inclusion of pupils in a new culture of collaborative classroom language learning, a community in which all can achieve something on an identifiable 'can do' basis. A formative approach to assessing and progressing learning is considered central to learning. It is argued that learners with SEN need to develop a new language learner identity that empowers them with a measure of self-agency in such a learning community.

In Chapter 2, Abbott takes a personal view of the history of technology use by teachers of languages, first centred around audio and then in response to the availability of a wide range of digital technologies. Where once such technologies were found only in the classroom, learners now have access to mobile and other devices that offer sophisticated language tools. At the same

time, the rapid development of the semantic web and social networking has offered fertile contexts for genuine linguistic engagement. A central focus of this chapter is the response of teachers and schools to these developments.

Wilson, in Chapter 3, identifies the challenges confronting teachers over recent years as they have differentiated their MFL lessons to include learners with SEN through information and communication technology (ICT). He argues for a more critical appraisal of the educational benefits of leading-edge technologies before their classroom adoption. SEN and ICT quite recently became priorities of MFL as a foundation subject within England's first National Curriculum. While MFL, SEN and ICT experts collaborated in the early years to pioneer good practice, the onus moved to MFL teachers working alone or, more recently, with a learning support assistant (LSA). Outside the classroom, Wilson argues, some adults expect too little from some learners, while assuming too much about the potential of ICT. The chapter includes a set of 10 practical scenarios for the readers to give thought to possible solutions.

Part 2: Case Studies

Vilar Beltrán and Sales Ciges, in Chapter 4, explore the languages classroom of the 21st century in English and Spanish schools. Drawing on research in the field, the authors focus in particular on beliefs and practices of language teachers with regards to context, pedagogical approach and differentiation and modification in response to diversity. In addition to exploring language teachers' perceptions, Vilar Beltrán and Sales Ciges analyse case studies of the implementation of digital technologies in language-teaching contexts. Digital technologies, they argue, not only form the reality for most students of this era but they could also be powerful tools that have the potential to enhance language teaching for all.

Chapter 5, by Domagała-Zyśk, focuses on the use of technology for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to the deaf and hard of hearing. For such people, as with all others, online environments offer the potential for building and maintaining social networks, enabling alternative communication without using speech. The internet has replaced previous modes of communication used by people who are deaf or hard of hearing, such as letters, faxes or text telephones. Using computer technology often requires the ability to use English. Many of the students described in this chapter have to learn EFL in order to update their knowledge and skills, and to access technology. Domagała-Zyśk describes the ways in which ICT can support the process of learning EFL, including a case study of the author's experience of using ICT during English classes for deaf students.

In Chapter 6, Meiring and Norman advance a case for ICT as an instrument for developing inclusive practice in the training of MFL teachers. They cite recent changes in legislation in Wales that have led to stronger demands for learners with SEN to have access to language learning. Using this policy requirement as a starting point, the authors consider the role and benefit of ICT in the curriculum, whether for access or enhancement. They consider the extent to which there may be a case for a distinctive pedagogy for SEN learners within MFL lessons, and the implications of this for teacher education. Using examples from their own practice in initial teacher education, the authors explore issues of pedagogy and resourcing, providing several practical examples.

The particular special needs of the learner with dyslexia are explored by Crombie in Chapter 7. In this chapter, Crombie, who has previously researched foreign language learning and dyslexia in schools in Scotland, considers a range of examples of inclusive practice. Building on her previous publications in this area, and her experience of working with teachers and learners, she considers how the use of technology in the foreign language classroom can benefit dyslexic and other learners. The chapter provides current and ready-to-use technologies for the classroom, and explains how these can be useful for language teachers.

The focus of Chapter 8 is an investigation by Connor into the extent to which interactive, creative resources can be a way to engage and motivate children who find learning difficult in the languages classroom. According to the author, the availability of interactive Web 2.0 tools has opened up new dimensions in the motivation and engagement of pupils who find learning languages difficult for various reasons. He argues that certain tools can provide students with an authentic purpose for their work, and if linked to a bespoke blog or wiki, can also provide them with an audience that could theoretically be global. Connor claims that blending digital technologies with other tried and tested approaches, such as making the learning active and kinaesthetic, affords students a much broader range of meaningful language learning opportunities.

Wassermann and Jeitler reflect on the conflicts between real-time resources and the storage of digitized materials including issues of copyright. Universities and other higher education institutions have been dealing with the complexities of digital resources for some time, but this has now become an issue for schools. This is particularly the case for teachers of languages who may wish to use authentic materials from digital versions of journals and magazines. In some cases, particular issues have arisen for learners with disabilities, for example visually impaired young people who need access to raw text for screen-readers. Without changes in the law of the kind that has

recently occurred in the UK, such processes risk infringing copyright. From their experiences of grappling with these issues at their own institution, the authors consider all aspects of digitizing, from proofing to publication and dissemination. They also consider different emerging and actual legal solutions to this important area of resource provision.

Looking Forward

In the conclusion, Vilar Beltrán, Abbott and Jones bring together the issues outlined in Part 1, which are detailed and exemplified in Part 2, to outline a blueprint for the immediate future. Here they balance the evident enthusiasm for technology-mediated language learning with a nuanced recognition of the constraints that exist, whether these are related to the provision of resources at a time of recession, the need for effective teacher education or the appropriate response to a socially networked learning community. The challenges for teachers with often conflicting demands are not underestimated. Despite acknowledging these complex and challenging areas, the editors tentatively indicate a shift from an experimental to a mature phase of development as technology becomes an invisible but vital tool for the 21st century languages teacher.

A Word About Terminology

Our three areas of focus: technology, learning difficulty and language teaching, lead us into a complex field with regards to terminology. In a book with many contributors it would neither be appropriate nor helpful to insist on one standard terminology throughout, especially since many of the terms in use are not truly synonymous and may reflect varying understandings and policies. ICT – information and communication technology – is the name of a curriculum area in the UK and is widely used across Europe. However, this may be changing, and recent announcements in the UK suggest that the term may fall out of use in England, at least in the revised curriculum to be launched in 2014. Technology – and its component part digital technology – are in more general use and are used for this reason by several contributors. The term special educational needs (SEN) has been widely used in the UK since the late 1970s, although not often elsewhere. Those learners identified in the UK as having SEN may be given other designations in other contexts, with terms such as additional support needs (ASN), learning difficulties, learning disabilities and intellectual difficulties all in use.