

TEACHING PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC*

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Abstract: this study critically compares and reviews teachers' perspectives regarding online teaching, with an emphasis on their experiences after the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Our main objective is to assess the effect of the pandemic on language teaching practice and its impact on the use of distance learning technologies in different educational settings. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches is used in the data analysis, linking literature review on technology in language education with data collection using a survey sent to teachers from different countries via social media. Findings of this study provide implications for the implementation of communities of practice for teachers, including intentions to implement digital literacy in teaching, as well as the development of a lifelong learning mindset amongst teachers. Future research should focus on the construction and implementation of online communities of practice for teachers where the adoption of new technologies and lifelong learning are included in their educational practices.

Keywords: learning technologies; language education; digital literacy; lifelong learning; teacher education.

1 Introduction

One of the most important events in recent years was the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the entire world. This pandemic has forced us to change our lives in many ways and adapt to a new normal, in particular, the education sector. These changes include a global lockdown, with the closure of schools and universities, and the need to suddenly shift from a traditional face-to-face model to online teaching in a short period of time. This has posed many challenges for language teachers and language educators, but it also provided “[...] opportunities to reshape education, teacher education, and educational institutions” (FLORES, 2020, p. 1).

The main aim of this study is to investigate the effect of the pandemic on language teaching and its impact on the use of distance learning technologies in different educational settings. This paper has been divided into three parts. First, it deals with technologies in language education from a decision-making perspective while understanding the affordances they provide. The next section is concerned with digital literacies and lifelong learning within the perspective of literacy for the 21st century. The final section addresses the data collection using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches through open and closed-ended questions, followed by an in-depth analysis of the findings.

2 Technologies in language education: What is new?

Changes in society caused by globalization and the advance of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have highly impacted different fields, transforming the way people learn and interact, “[...] improving efficiency, decision making”, and developing

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21st century skills while they play a key role in countries development (REDDY; SHARMA; CHAUDHARY, 2020, p. 67).

When it comes to education, Reddy, Sharma and Chaudhary (2020, p. 73) highlight that using ICT have opened a lot of opportunities for lifelong learning and paradigm shifts, going from a “[...] traditional instruction-based learning to virtual learning environments”, which changed the roles of both teachers - putting them as advisors, facilitators - and students - as co-creators of knowledge.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced teachers into a remote teaching model, where many were unprepared, unfamiliar with learning technologies, and unable to select appropriate materials and strategies for this type of teaching. (COSCARELLI, 2020a; FETTERMANN, 2020a).

Although emergency remote teaching has posed numerous challenges, it has also brought opportunities such as the possibility to assign tasks operating with more realistic deadlines, broader search conditions, more diverse digital tools, and as a result, more complex, interesting, and multiliterate results and productions by students. These relate to the flipped classroom approach, which combine synchronous and asynchronous moments, fostering hybrid or blended learning², and extending its concept.

Some contexts, as a result, have seen a shift away from the investment in machines or the modernization of computer labs as the ‘Classroom of the future’, “[...] with specially adapted furniture which gave students relatively painless access to computers built into desks” (PEACOCK, 2013, p. 2), and towards the provision of learning experiences which help students work collaboratively, solving problems, creating projects, and getting involved in meaningful real-world task, while providing a link between the proposals of the school curriculum and the world experienced by the students through the digital technologies. This way, they will use the language they are learning to build their own concepts and explanations in critical analyses, applying it to their own reality (FETTERMANN, 2020b).

3 Digital literacy and lifelong learning

The current state of affairs requires language teachers to plan lessons considering skills that are not exclusively linguistic. As time goes by, learners acquire a second or an additional language while developing digital literacy skills, to interact in social contexts beyond their own communities.

In his study, Gilster (1997, p. 1) states that DL is “[...] the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers”, whereas for Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan (2006, p. 1), it is “[...] person’s ability to perform tasks effectively in a digital environment [...]”, including “[...] the ability to read and interpret media, to reproduce data and images through digital manipulation, and to evaluate and apply new knowledge gained from digital environments”. Coscarelli (2020b, p. 31) goes further by establishing a link between the idea of DL and “[...] search, selection, analysis, integration and use of information from multiple sources, with the use of digital technologies available for free on the internet”.

² According to Horn and Stacker (2015, p. 34), blended learning is “[...] any formal educational program in which a student learns, at least in part, through online teaching, with some element of student control over time, place, the path and/or the rhythm.”

Stanly's (2013) definition of DL is congruent with that of Tang and Chaw (2016, p. 56), who argue that "Digital literacy needs to be renewed as digital technology evolves over time". The authors classify it into three different levels, according to Martin (2006): (1) digital competence or know-how; (2) digital usage - opportunity to apply digital competence; and (3) digital transformation - in which there is the creation of new knowledge that results from the digital usage. This suggests different levels of digital literacy for students and different expectations from teachers regarding learners' capabilities. This leads to the understanding that students have different levels of digital literacy, thus teachers should have different expectations regarding what they are capable of doing. These expectations suggest that teachers need to engage in a process of continuous growth and development to stay relevant. As noted by Pond (2003), the illiterate of the 21st century will be those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn, and stay abreast of new developments. This suggests the need to become lifelong learners.

Lifelong learning (LLL) is now considered a critical educational goal (DUNLAP & LOWENTHAL, 2013). However, defining LLL is challenging because it not only encompasses formal, informal, and non-formal learning, but also involves skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours acquired in a person's day-to-day experiences (DUNN, 2003). The term Lifelong learning is used here to describe all learning activity undertaken throughout life (from the cradle to the grave) where a person

[...] experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically and integrated into the individual person's biography, resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person (JARVIS, 2006, p. 134).

Thus, LLL plays an important role in the development of 21st century skills. It allows teachers to engage in a cycle of learning, unlearning, and relearning, where they develop the ability to learn and adapt through a process of reflection of their current understanding, identifying gaps in their knowledge, and seeking to learn beyond their current understanding (DUNLAP, 2005). This implies a genuine love of learning and a willingness to engage in self-directed learning – i.e. adopting a lifelong learning mindset.

There are a number of benefits ascribed to LLL. Hildebrand (2008) notes that it sharpens the mind, increases confidence by stepping outside one's comfort zone, develops interpersonal skills by sharing what is learned with others via a community of practice (LAVE; WENGER, 1991), and augments career growth. Similarly, Mascle (2007) maintains that LLL provides freedom, where traditional assessments, such as graded exams, are replaced by more practical assessments, such as a group project. This means that learning requires change, and change drives learning, which suggests that the two are inevitably intertwined.

4 Data analysis and discussion

This study used quantitative and qualitative techniques, which complement each other in the data analysis (CASARIN; CASARIN, 2012). The analysis, based on the literature review selected for this work, and the data, collected using a semi-structured questionnaire with 13 closed-ended and open-ended questions, were sent to teachers from different countries via social media (Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp), spanning the period from August 5th to 26th, 2021. Working with content categorization, provided qualitative and quantitative indicators that allowed the inference of knowledge related to the production/reception

conditions (inferred variables) of the participants' answers for the open-ended question (BARDIN, 2016).

The dataset analysed provides preliminary evidence and theoretical support for understanding the effects of the pandemic on language teaching practice and its impact on the use of distance learning technologies in different educational settings.

Overall, 30 teachers from different countries, who authorized the use of their answers for academic purposes, ensuring their anonymity, participated in the survey: Brazil (24), Canada (2), Colombia (1), Italy (1), Peru (1) and Spain (1). Their educational background varies from kindergarten to higher education, albeit most of them have reported to be private teachers (15 / 51,7%). 11 (37,9%) of the teachers declared to work at language schools, while 12 (41,4%) said they teach in basic education - kindergarten (2 / 6,7%), elementary school (4 / 13,3%) and high school (6 / 20%) - and, finally, six (20%) in higher education.

Despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic in education, especially concerning social disparities and inequalities, most of the teachers (26 / 86,7%) believe that it is somewhat easy to use distance learning technologies. Our findings are consistent with Tang and Chaw's (2016, p. 56) thoughts on the need for digital literacy "[...] to be renewed as digital technology evolves over time", and the DL different levels defined by Martin (2006), mentioned in section 2. It can thus be suggested that the confidence gained during remote teaching practices facilitated the use of distance learning technologies.

The level of confidence in providing effective instruction in this new learning model shows that half of participants (14 / 46,7%) had to learn how to use distance learning technologies to teach remotely, which is in line with Coscarelli's (2020) argument that we had to rapidly adapt to a new teaching model and use tools that we had not used before, without prior training or preparation. This suggests that working in the education field requires constant awareness of digital tools and engagement in a lifelong learning process, to encourage our students to develop skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours through language learning (DUNN, 2003).

Next, three (10,3%) participants stated low levels of satisfaction, while 26 (89,7%) of them declared to be (somewhat to very) satisfied with the current learning model in their teaching environment. Aligned with this, most of the participants (27 / 90% out of 30) said they were (somewhat to very) confident that they could provide effective instruction to students in the current learning model. These results demonstrate that teachers seem to have adopted a lifelong learning mentality by being able to react to changes and adapt accordingly. This is in line with Pond's (2003) argument for the need to learn, unlearn and relearn things, which in this context is related to the way teachers needed to rethink tools, methodologies applied in classes, strategies, materials, and all the dynamics required in the digital environment.

Interestingly, 25 (83,3%) of the respondents reported they make a lot of effort, while a minority of the participants indicated they make a little (2 / 6,7%) or not much effort into planning (3 / 10%). This means that although teachers had more digital tools at hand and could provide students with tasks and experiences different from those of the face-to-face school environment, more time should be invested in preparation (i.e., making powerpoint presentations, choosing websites with activities, selecting and creating digital materials etc.). Together, these reinforce the importance and benefits of digital literacy and lifelong learning in emergency situations, such as the pandemic.

Surprisingly, most teachers felt somewhat (10 / 33,3%) to very (15 / 50%) connected to their students, probably due to the benefits of teaching online and the ease of access to digital engaging tools, while 24 (80%) of them experienced difficulties bonding with students. Also, three (10%) expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time spent interacting with their students, nine (30%) were not very satisfied, 6 (20%) were comfortable with the interactions, seven (23,3) were satisfied, while only five (16,7%) felt they were very satisfied.

Indeed, as the pandemic advanced and teachers had to continue teaching completely online or on the blended mode, they improved their ability to perform tasks more effectively in digital environments, being more able to apply new knowledge gained from their practice with them (JONES-KAVALLIER; FLANNIGAN, 2006) and interact with their learners, which is (and should be) a continuous process - and, therefore, also requires lifelong learning.

Finally, the question on learning opportunities during the pandemic allowed for the categorization of responses into three themes (table 1), according to Bardin (2016): (1) Building rapport and a sense of community; (2) Adaptation and lifelong learning; and (3) Learning and using new tools.

Table 1 – Content analysis of Question 13

Categories	Absolute frequency	Percentage frequency	Responses *P (Participant)
Building rapport and a sense of community	10	33,3%	P19 - “That collaborative learning is so much more enriching. Back away from testing” P23 - “Make it simple, connect with your students and if things don’t work out, try again, resilience.”
Adaptability and lifelong learning	13	43,3%	P3 - “How to be patient” P8 - “I learned to become more adaptable and open to new ideas”
Learning and using new tools	9	30%	P27 - “I’ve learned that using different online tools is much more efficient than relying on a single one.” P16 - “Teaching remotely [...] involves much more effort and thinking.”

Source: Dataset 2021

With the increase in use of online tools and the need for digital literacy, a common view amongst respondents (10 / 33,3%) was that rapport building and the development of a community are of paramount importance in online learning. These results are likely to be related to the many challenges faced by teachers to master digital literacy tools, the participatory nature it stimulates, and how, together as members of a professional community of practice, they further their knowledge and expertise by collaborating and interacting continuously (LAVE & WENGER, 1991). Additionally, these findings may help us to understand the importance of relationship building and joint activities in online environments in that it allows teachers and students to learn from each other as committed members of a community of practice (ibid).

Another common theme that emerged from the data was the fundamental need to become convinced that learning is a lifelong process and the role it plays in becoming more adaptable to societal and, especially, technological changes. 43.3% (13) of the respondents indicated that possessing a lifelong learning mindset allowed them to make the transition from face-to-face practice to digital learning technologies. Two other participants (P8 & P26) mentioned the importance of the embodiment of specific lifelong learning traits that empowered them to learn, unlearn, and relearn (DUNLAP, 2005). While acknowledging the difficulties posed by the pandemic on teachers and learners, respondents believed that patience, resilience, generosity, and adaptability were essential when coping with the transition to online learning. This combination of characteristics provides some support for the conceptual premise that, in the 21st century, we all need to be lifelong learners if we wish to continue to grow, develop, and adapt to the rapidly changing nature of the world. In addition, this may support Dunlap's (2005) hypothesis that teachers must create opportunities for learners to become more self-directed while developing metacognitive awareness and an inclination toward lifelong learning.

A final recurrent theme expressed in the questionnaire was a sense amongst respondents that they had to learn how to use new tools in order to make the transition from face-to-face to remote teaching. As shown in table 1, 30% (9) of participants reported that they learned about the purpose of different tools or the integration of these in their language teaching practice. Surprisingly, some teachers highlighted the importance of identifying, finding, using, and analyzing resources for meeting the learning needs. This view is supported by Coscarelli (2020b, p. 31), who writes that decisions related to the use of digital technology require “[...] search, selection, analysis, integration and use of information from multiple sources.” This finding has important implications for the expectations in distance and online learning, requiring both teachers and learners to become more accountable and take initiative in their own “[...] learning-related decisions” (CANDY, 1991).

5 Conclusions

The main goal of the current study was to determine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector, with an emphasis on teachers' perspectives. The aim was to assess how teachers adapted to the transition from face-to-face to online learning as well as understanding their rationale for employing distance learning technologies in different educational settings.

This study has found that generally teachers have responded positively to the changes imposed by the pandemic and emergency remote learning. It has also shown that digital literacy played a pivotal role in this adaptation to an online learning environment, where educators had to experiment with different digital tools without proper training and knowledge of their educational values. The results of this investigation show that these experiences teachers had during remote learning had the potential to help both teachers and learners to develop skills and tendencies necessary to become lifelong learners. More specifically, the findings suggest that educators can employ these technologies to foster autonomy, accountability, resilience, decision-making, and risk-taking. Taken together, these findings suggest a role for lifelong learning which is of primary importance in enhancing the quality of language education.

A natural progression of this work is to analyse the potential of digital literacy and lifelong learning in helping both teachers and learners to meet their pedagogical and learning needs.

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