

From computer-assisted language learning to digitally mediated intercultural communication

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Abstract. Digital technologies have proliferated communications between speakers of different languages, but the widespread use of online machine translation has now become a disruptive force for foreign language education, as it permits intelligible exchanges between persons with little or no knowledge of a foreign tongue. As machine translation technology only continues to improve, the entire purpose of foreign language learning, computer-assisted or otherwise, may one day soon likely be called into question. While nothing is ever truly future-proof, the sustainability of foreign language education may require a shift in focus, away from traditional language acquisition and toward social semiotic awareness and multimodal intercultural communication. This paper describes a reconceptualization of language education from this proposed perspective. It then suggests possible roles for digital technologies in sustainable language teaching.

Keywords: symbolic competence, intercultural communicative competence, sustainable foreign language teaching.

1. Introduction

Technological development has facilitated globalization, which in turn has brought formerly distant peoples from diverse cultures into much more frequent contact with one another and, thus, unquestionably increased the need for communication between them. However, the degree to which the normalization of such intercultural interactions has correspondingly increased the need for additional language proficiency (aside from English) is debatable, as globalization has also led to significant cultural homogenization and language extinction. Moreover,

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public pages on internationally popular social media platforms reveal countless examples of ‘good enough’ communication between interlocutors with sometimes very limited knowledge of each other’s linguistic code. Whether these types of exchanges are the product of machine translation, emergent pidgins, or some combination thereof, to deny their existence or acceptability would be unrealistic. In short, digital technologies have fundamentally altered the nature of modern communication, and foreign language educators would be wise to take these developments into consideration in envisioning their professional future.

2. Background

Most introductory-level foreign language study being compulsory, its justification has long been an important concern. Fortunately, with the advancement of digital technologies and the advent of the Internet, computer-assisted language learning has progressed from the largely drill-based applications of its earliest years to the custom-made collections of atomized didactic resources of today (Gimeno-Sanz, 2016), now often including tools for bringing learners together online to provide them with real opportunities for actual communication.

However, a critical distinction needs to be made here between language acquisition and mere use. While computer-mediated communication activities and social media interactions may arguably be more interesting and enjoyable than traditional classroom-based lessons, these types of exchanges often exhibit liberal code mixing, which, though undeniably permissible if not absolutely obligatory in these situations, does not readily promote the pushed output that might motivate mastery of linguistic forms with potentially greater currency.

A parallel phenomenon even more threatening to foreign language education than code mixing, however, is the indiscriminate use of machine translation. As freely available online tools have now made possible the instant translation of dozens of languages into countless others with a mere click of a button, naïve language users may be reinforced in the common misconception of communication as a more or less mathematical process, whereby messages are formulaically encoded into their equivalent linguistic symbols in the head of one person and then methodically transmitted for systematic decoding by another. Such a view may be fine if one simply wants to know the gist of what is being said, but it renders the issue of language acquisition in this case virtually irrelevant. In some ways, this predicament might be considered an unfortunate extension of undisciplined communicative language learning, whereby ‘good’ communication has been

universally supplanted by the ‘good enough’, only now it is no longer even human learners producing the target language.

Given the increasingly integrated and interdependent economies in our globalized society, international communication is indeed more necessary than ever, but the implications for foreign language education are anything but clear. Of course, for the foreseeable future, there will still be a demand for highly proficient foreign language users who master the traditional body of relevant linguistic knowledge and skills. However, these individuals have always comprised but a fraction of total enrollments. Thus, in light of these recent and rapid technological developments and the trending responses to them, some key questions for the profession are these: What do most L2 learners really need to know in order to be able to effectively communicate for their own purposes? And how might that impact on our pedagogy?

3. Discussion

Even if learners could manage translations of low-context transactional language without machine assistance, we would do well not to insist, as there is little workplace demand for humans to perform routine, repetitive, and predictable tasks that machines can accomplish faster and more economically (Ford, 2015). Instead, we should emphasize skills that machines neither currently possess nor are soon likely to, such as creativity and critical thinking. In this vein, we should first try to dispel the misconception of communication as mainly denotative, transactional language by highlighting the connotative and interactional aspects. For example, learners should be made to reflect on what they are actually trying to achieve with language and how. Borrowing a core tenet from mainstream translation theory, we must go beyond lexico-grammatical issues and carefully examine the textual and pragmatic (Baker, 1992).

Next, we need to foster symbolic competence, that is, understanding of the complexity, ambiguity, and formal meanings of communication (Kramsch, 2006). Learners need to be able to recognize the meaning potentials of various semiotic resources, each with its own conventional sociocultural and historical uses and significations. They need to be cognizant of probable interpretations, all the while maintaining awareness of the ever-present possibility of divergence. Furthermore, they must acknowledge form (including not only linguistic but also non-linguistic modes of expression) as having sociocultural implications even when seemingly lacking semantic significance. To this end, teachers need to adopt a “multilingual mindset”, which Kramsch (2014) characterizes as embracing “diversity of meaning,

as expressed through the different codes, modes, modalities, and styles that have currency in a global world that is now constantly and ubiquitously interconnected” (p. 253).

In addition to symbolic competence, we should also foster intercultural communicative competence, starting with raising learners’ sociolinguistic and cultural self-awareness. Although national identity and presumed culture play pivotal roles in interlingual encounters (Byram, 1997), learners should realize that every individual, regardless of national origin, represents a unique constellation of differing gender, ethnicity, age, and social class group memberships and that all communication is, thus, essentially intercultural. In this way, they can come to appreciate their foreign language learning experience even if they never again have opportunity to use the language itself. To this end, we should help learners recognize conventional uses and interpretations of various semiotic resources within the competing discourse communities to which these individuals already belong. One way this goal might be advanced is through explicit treatment of often unconscious and implicit factors that shape all our communications, whether or not they occur in discernibly different linguistic varieties. Following the discourse approach of Scollon and Scollon (2001), we can then assist learners in improving their ability both to reduce ambiguity through greater shared knowledge about participant identities and to deal with any miscommunication that still inevitably arises.

Finally, as to the specific role of digital technologies in these efforts, a non-exhaustive list of a few of the possibilities includes the following:

- cross-cultural comparisons of authentic multimedia texts modeling pragmatic language use between interlocutors with different social roles and relationships;
- instruction on effective online dictionary and translator use, especially in conjunction with corpus analyses to highlight collocational associations and contextual constraints;
- discourse analyses of recorded online intercultural exchanges; and
- online games, including not only drills but also role plays.

The point here is not to imply anything novel in the individual or collective pedagogical use of authentic multimedia texts, online linguistic reference and

research tools, online exchanges, or online games themselves. Rather it is to suggest a shift in their focus, away from the acquisition of primarily linguistic elements and toward an informed understanding and the skillful use of multimodal semiotic resources.

4. Conclusion

While digital technologies have brought the world's peoples into closer contact, they have also disrupted conventional interlingual communications such that the end goal of foreign language education is now ironically in question. In response, we must shift our pedagogical focus from transactional to interactional language use and expand the traditional notion of language arts to include not only linguistic modes of meaning-making but non-linguistic ones as well. Moreover, we should teach the use of digital media for integrating these various semiotic resources into rich, multimodal expressions of thought and feeling in order to foster greater symbolic and intercultural competence. In this way, we can hope to make our profession the truly humanistic endeavor it should be.

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