Higher Education and Second Language Learning

Promoting Self-Directed Learning in New Technological and Educational Contexts

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Introduction: Second Language Teaching and Learning for the Twenty-First Century

Society is undergoing numerous, rapid changes, driven by equally numerous social, economic and technological developments. Higher education has not been immune to this. Not only have the number of students in higher education increased dramatically in many parts of the world, but the developments alluded to above have led to significant changes in how people go about learning. It is widely recognized nowadays that education needs to prepare learners with competences for lifelong learning (European Commission 2006); in the context of higher education, this means the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are relevant beyond graduation. Thus, teaching has to embrace the above situation and address the needs of learners in ways that will be relevant for the twenty-first century. A further factor in this context is the increasingly globalized nature of our world, alongside the increasing need to work across borders, of which the ever-increasing number of students crossing borders to study is but one example. In Europe, specifically, the move towards plurilingualism has been reinforced through the 'own language plus two' concept.

The challenges faced by teaching and learning second languages within the context outlined above are strikingly similar to those faced by other disciplines in higher education. However, teaching and learning a language poses unique challenges since, unlike almost all other disciplines, its subject matter is so often also the vehicle of instruction (QAA 2007). Thus, it is frequently recognized that in learning languages there are more affective concerns such as anxiety and communication apprehension that are not so salient in other disciplines (Horwitz *et al.* 1986). Another factor to consider nowadays is that more flexibility in higher education programmes allows students to take languages as part of their degrees, even where their primary degree is not specifically in languages. The nature of specialist and non-specialist language teaching, or between language departments which see themselves as primarily oriented towards the study of literature and those departments for whom the main objective is to give students the tools to communicate successfully in another language and culture, presents challenges in language teaching in most higher education contexts. Furthermore, support for language learning is not so evident in countries such as the UK or Ireland, where resources are diminishing in relative terms, partly due as a result of the common perception that 'English is enough' (Nuffield Foundation 2000). Across Europe, financial pressures since 2008 mean that universities are having to do more with less; relatively speaking, teaching languages is expensive, requiring higher numbers of contact hours and smaller class sizes than many other subjects, without the ability to easily draw large external funding, and this runs against the trend of doing more with less.

Considering the factors outlined above, we can characterize the context of second-language teaching and learning in higher education as follows:

- Student choice is central in the new educational context. Students study languages for different reasons, and rarely only for the sake of learning a language.
- Technology is embedded in education. The new educational context has computing and technology in its DNA and it is almost impossible nowadays to conceive of course design and course delivery without computers and mobile technology at their core. Indeed, the panorama is shifting so quickly that many students now communicate with staff and other students, send emails, access materials and sources using smartphones or tablets, rather than even a laptop, which itself has become ubiquitous only since the mid-2000s. This poses significant challenges to us today as educators. We must work differently, because students expect it. We must work differently, because the technology has changed the relationship between staff and students. We must work differently, because the technology carries infinitely more information than any individual lecturer or group of lecturers.

- Our relationship with students has changed forever, and is mediated through technology, whether we like it or not. Our relationship with materials, content and ideas has changed forever, because the technology gives easy instantaneous access to a quantity of content and ideas never before available. In this new environment, the role of the lecturer or tutor as the repository of information and knowledge has been brought into question. It is no longer sufficient for us simply to tell students things, or for students to have to go through us in order to access information and knowledge. Simply put, students can get *information* by themselves, they don't *need* us.
- In this context, technology can be both saviour and dictator. We can do things with technology that we were not able to do before. Technology allows us to survive in the new context because it gives us the tools to do more things more quickly. However, in many respects technology puts pressure on educators and some may feel forced to use it without a clear pedagogical justification. And many staff in higher education are just not as comfortable using these technologies as the students are.
- Technology allows educators to reach more students with the same amount of work, in principle at least. This has clear economic benefits in that technology allows us to do many more things more quickly. In essence, the net benefit is that we are freed up to do additional, new things or that we can create more capacity for more students. This we see as a negative benefit.
- There is renewed interest in self-directed learning. There are evident pedagogical reasons for this, resulting in lifelong learning that goes beyond economic benefits, although it cannot be denied that the changing economic contexts of higher education is also a driver. One of the key possibilities of the new technologies is how it can be applied to self-directed learning and learning beyond the classroom.

To conclude, developments in information and communication technologies as well as in socio-cultural pedagogical classroom practices, in particular learners' increasingly active role in shaping their learning, are having an ever greater impact on second language learning and teaching in higher education. These developments increase the options available for learning languages but, in a context characterized by greater student diversity, pose considerable challenges to teachers who aim to ensure that 'students are actively involved in a variety of educational activities that are likely to lead to high quality learning' (Coates 2005: 26). The ready availability of such technologies inside and outside the classroom enables teachers to maximize their use in the classroom and to facilitate self-directed learning outside the classroom. As a result, the roles of the teacher and the learners have changed dramatically.

This edited book was born out of the idea of sharing pedagogical experiences that address how a number of academics involved in the teaching of second languages in general – and in teaching French, German, Italian, Spanish and EFL at universities, more specifically – have embraced the challenges and opportunities of facilitating student learning in a new technological and educational context. The twin focus of the chapters in this book, namely, technology and self-directed learning, drive and, at the same time, respond to the needs of this changing educational context. The chapters in this book explore many of the new possibilities and challenges in second language teaching and learning in higher education, including critical thinking, creativity, cultural barriers, customization of learning, space and time or how technology can successfully be embedded in sound pedagogical practices.

In Chapter 1, Badger and White argue that we are no longer primarily educating students for a career within a defined path. Indeed, the concept of 'career' itself has been called into question. Instead, they discuss how students need to develop creativity and critical-thinking skills which they can apply forward into new contexts. The chapter explores the use of digital tools to develop critical-thinking skills. Chapter 2 addresses the issue of cultural baggage carried by international students. Sudhershan and Bruen argue that the influx of students from other cultures creates educational challenges in the classroom and support the idea of addressing student educational baggage to facilitate their learning. In Chapter 3, Märlein discusses the importance of catering for a diverse body of students whose needs differ; he suggests that a way to address diversity is by mass-customizing learning;

more specifically, he focuses on ways that assessment might be customized in order to cope with more heterogeneous student learning needs.

The following four chapters in this book explore the use of technological tools to facilitate learning. Ferrari and Zhurauskaya, in Chapter 4, recount the experience of moving to a digital e-portfolio where students have to record and show evidence of independence and guided learning. In Chapter 5, Jebali argues for a new definition of oral competence that takes into account the medium used to communicate, in this case the use of Skype. He argues that oral communication via Skype, blended with face-to-face activities, benefits all students, not only timid ones. Hernández (Chapter 6) examines the use of video-recording in promoting self-directed learning and reflection, through two case studies where video-recording is used as a tool to enhance formative and summative assessment of student work. Rankin, in Chapter 7, explores the relationship between the technology and human relationships in two oral-language modules, and argues that, as in so many things in life, context is everything.

The chapters by Cassany, Panichi and Berns and Palomo-Duarte put forward the idea of language as a social activity and explore student collaboration through tools more usually associated with non-educational social activities, namely social networks such as Facebook and smartphone APPs. Cassany (Chapter 8) explores the use in the language classroom of two popular and interactive digital tools (chats and forums) and gives a detailed classification of each and their usefulness. Panichi (Chapter 9) discusses the same area through the lens of the teacher and the technology, while Berns and Palomo-Duarte argue in Chapter 10 that one way to address the lack of classroom time available for target-language interaction is to build learning opportunities outside the classroom such as the language-learning APP which they describe.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Alderete investigates how university institutions place constraint on the space and time available for language learning and shows how there may be potential in virtual learning environments (VLE) and the learning tools within them to successfully extend language learning beyond the classroom walls.

Our hope is that this book will be of interest to teachers of second languages, including EFL/ESL, and to those working in university environments, either in language departments or larger school units, as well as language centres in those universities. Although we are conscious that a limited number of pedagogical experiences are examined, we have taken care to place the focus on the universal application of all the discussions. It is our belief that they offer the wider community of language practitioners sound pedagogical practices, grounded in theoretical perspectives, of how languages are learnt and taught.

References

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