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Communication and Language Learning in Virtual Environments through an Eco-Semiotic Lens

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Abstract

The paper explores the interface between the new theoretical approach of ecolinguistics and language educational practices in the new digital environments that we have plunged into during 2020-2021. From the standpoint of ecological communication and eco-semiotics, the exploration highlights its impact on language learning and education in general, as re-contextualized in the new digital spaces we have all been experiencing as educators and learners. The theoretical input from semiotics and conceptual linguistics on the one hand, and educational ecology on the other hand, is paired with a direct empirical analysis of the students' language learning experience at the USAMVBT University of Timisoara, Romania, the University of Tetova, North Macedonia, and Łomża State University from Poland. Our aim is to better understand how to sustain students' communicational skills and their overall adaptation to the emerging digitalised educational environment across fields of study.

Keywords: *Eco-semiotics, sustainable communication, digital literacy, English language learning, virtual environments.*

1. Introduction

We are witnessing an extensive process of digitalization of social space and interaction which poses new challenges to education and communication across all curricular areas. Virtual realities and relationships mediated through computers and smart systems entail new types of human ecologies which have to adapt rapidly to the digital environment. Learning processes and interactive modalities are currently being redesigned in a global collaborative effort across a large number of countries, where researchers have shared a wealth of digital pedagogy responses (Crawford et al., 2020). Less attention has been paid to psycho-social factors and the quality of the students' learning experience in relation to the need to facilitate this transition

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and to help participants engage in “a meaningful dialogue” even in virtual classrooms (Neuwirth et al., 2020). The purpose of this study is to analyze the role and challenges of digitalization in language education during the pandemic situation and to discuss the students’ perceptions and other qualitative implications of the new teaching/learning modalities.

The main challenges revolve around maintaining a sense of shared learning experience, bridging the distance by enabling a humanistic dimension, and building “soft skills” in order to help learners adapt to the complex realities of digitalized education. Current value systems are undergoing extensive changes in the information society, as are the ways of communication in social spaces (Yurkiv & Krasnova, 2021). The process of introducing digital technologies to education had already started before the pressing circumstances of the 2020 pandemic (Buabeng-Andoh, 2012, p. 79; Kozma, 2011). However, the young generation of digital learners must adapt to the new multidimensional quality of education (Angelini & García-Carbonell, 2019).

In the fluctuating global matrix of the World Wide Web, it is not only necessary for communicators to be equipped with digital skills and English language skills, but it is also imperative to be able to adapt quickly to changing trends (Banks, 2016). Furthermore, we have to focus on developing competences for “reading” multimedia genres, including not only texts, but also “image and screen literacy” (Brown, 2002). Thus, language learning in the new media builds on multimodal learning resources, including images, sound, and various digital modes of communication, all of which shape meaning in different ways (Kress, 2010). More recently, literacy development has been enlarged to also integrate “multidimensional technologies” and “multimodality” (Luke, 2003). The study aims to highlight that, despite these revolutionizing processes, it is possible to maintain a sense of sustainable learning in the language class and ecological communication in general as we have discussed in previous research on ecological communication

2. Material and method

The paper takes a qualitative and experience-based approach from the perspective of ecolinguistics to analyze the possibilities of establishing and maintaining the ecology of communication within the new digital language learning landscapes. As shown in research conducted previously, it is essential to create ecological language learning communities in order to stimulate the learners’ communicative potential (Dragoescu Urlica & Stefanović, 2018). With a view to optimizing English (both ESP and EFL) teaching and learning at academic level, the authors attempt to assess challenges and benefits of online education as experienced by students from several faculties within Banat’s USAMVB from Timisoara – Romania, Lomza University of Applied Sciences – Poland, and the English Language and Literature Department from the University of Tetovo – North Macedonia. The authors have applied convenience sampling and conducted comparative analyses of the non-random sample of 16 students participating in the study. The paper presents the results of our survey and empirical case-study

conducted during the academic year 2020-2021.

3. Results and Discussion

This inquiry was aimed at finding effective strategies for the improvement of communicative skills in online teaching practice, based on insights we derived from the learners' feedback. From the standpoint of ecolinguistics, we analyzed the main problems we have encountered during the academic year 2020-2021, the better part of which was transferred to virtual environment.

The responses to the questionnaire provided feedback supporting these hypotheses, raising the awareness of the research team as to the students' individual ecologies. On the other hand, students also shared their perceptions on the paradoxical disconnection of digital classes and expressed their personal reasons for closing their cameras more often than teachers would have preferred. In sum, most online class participants, who have studied English online for the past three semesters, are undergoing challenges as to the de-naturalization of the communicative process. In the students' feedback and exploratory analysis, we have identified a growing sense of anxiety to share the camera and many choose to remain "in hiding". This tendency is also in line with the observation made by Kaltwasser & al. (2014), among many others – teachers, authors and parents alike – that young people use screens to "hide" themselves, largely replacing real life interactions with virtual reality. As regards the need for actual participation versus the students' right to their own image and privacy, there have also been concerns regarding the necessity of protecting these aspects on the social media during online learning (Dobrila, 2021).

The results obtained from the feedback analysis complement the practical experience of online EFL classes in deciphering the challenges of teaching English to digital learners using ecological tools and resources during virtual meetings and via video conference, while also taking emotional factors into consideration. It should also be noted that participants in the survey have often responded emotionally to questions relating to ways in which digital learning has transformed their lives. Many answers reflected higher levels of anxiety related to language use than usual in face-to-face situations, motivating that they feel "uncomfortable" to speak English while on camera in front of peers, which confirms research conducted by academics worldwide (Kasbi & Shirvan, 2017). We noted that the "willingness to communicate" factor (Cao, 2011, p. 468) – a staple of ecological studies of language learning – has declined, as compared to traditional situated context. The learners' answers provided insights into their real-life situated experiences, despite attending classes via platforms. Nonetheless, the learning experiences may only remain real in as much as they are correlated with the students' emotions and attitudes, from the standpoint of language ecology (Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017).

Furthermore, the problem of accessibility is referred to as a major issue by most authors discussing the limitations of digital technologies (Male & Burden, 2014). The Report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2015) discusses the students' varying degrees of access to Information and

Communication Technology devices, which are not always integrated into the learning experience provided by all institutions. Differences in access to ICT reflect the “digital divide” due to socio-economic or geographic aspects. In view of engaging the emerging technologies, it is of foremost importance that all students be equipped and enabled to participate in “the hyper-connected, digitised societies of the 21st century”, according to the desiderata of the OECD (2015).

Among the majority of respondents, the main motivations for participating in the new type of digital learning is the fact that they “are able to protect themselves and their families”, as several respondents have stated. Had it not been for the compelling situation we have been facing, most of them would rather resume in-person learning in actual classes at the University. A close analysis of the students’ feedback generally indicates that their preferred forms of participation are still face-to-face embodied classes. This might also explain why most respondents find it difficult to present themselves as available for class interactions and sometimes refuse online discussions. As educators, we need to find ways to make EFL learning more interactive and inclusive for learners who are not digitally literate. This may be a limit for teachers as well, considering that the shift to teaching in new digital settings poses problems we have scarcely been trained to address. Secondly, we need to find adapted technology-based interactive teaching methods via what has been termed the “immersive interface” so as to provide a more genuine learning experience (Dede & Barab, 2009, p. 301).

Finally, the lockdown confronted teachers and students alike with new trust and responsibility challenges as regards the learners’ assessment and accountability for fair play educational practices (Huber & Helm, 2020). Given the fact that we all had to adapt to radical novelty in a very short time, teachers had little time and knowhow in providing feedback, as well as in conducting online assessments (König et al., 2020, p. 616). This process was vastly modified from traditional practices as we had to rely more on students’ self-regulating capabilities, hoping to enhance value system building more heavily in the future of education.

4. Conclusions and Limitations

According to the ecolinguistic account of language learning, establishing ecological relationships underlies the goal of EFL and language learning in general. As our research has shown, the transition to digital language classes is profoundly changing the way communication takes place among the “networked” generation. Further research will have to look into strategies to support learners to develop not only language skills, but the kind of “soft” skills required in a new digital landscape: flexibility, resilience, and an awareness of the relevance of co-participation in humanizing the experience of virtual learning.

The comparative survey we have conducted indicated that the generalized confusion, lack of meaning and underdeveloped soft skills act as factors which motivate the students’ self-effacing options, making them struggle with anxiety and a pervasive sense of isolation. Having identified these aspects, we need to further

inquire into how we can help learners maintain a sense of meaning and well-being during digital language classes, which we strive to maintain ecological, interactive, collaborative and communicative.

The hypothesis we had formulated in the beginning has not been fully confirmed by the findings and results discussed above, based on the experimental survey analysis. As regards our main theoretical hypothesis, the possibility of accessing an expanded domain of boundless communication, it is wise to note that the process of evolution in this direction is barely in its incipient phase. Therefore, learners, together with educators, have yet to face highly complex avenues ahead as this new process of co-evolution unfolds further along the way.

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