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# **Moving language teaching and learning from the known to the unknown**

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## **Introduction**

In 2020, at the time of writing this introductory chapter, the largely unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic created an unexpected context in which to consider developments in language learning with technology. Widely imposed restrictions on mobility and travel suddenly put an end to many of the benefits of mobile learning, when conceived as learning on the move rather than merely the use of mobile devices. New requirements for social distancing put a stop to habitual sharing and passing around of technology among friends, colleagues, students, and even strangers such as users of internet cafes or tourists handing over their mobile phone to have their photo taken. People were forced to adapt in haste to new circumstances, including teachers and students being required to start teaching and learning remotely. Many began using technologies and applications they had never used or even heard of before.

Yet before all that happened, the year 2020 — with its pleasingly repeating pattern of numerals and its association with 20/20 ‘perfect vision’ — had an almost magical feel to it and a symbolic value as a harbinger of bright new beginnings. It was an aspirational target date for ambitious initiatives and fresh perspectives. From global initiatives such as the European Commission’s ‘Europe 2020’ strategy for growth (2010), to national plans for development through education such as the ‘towards vision 2020’ Malaysian project (Lee 1999), the “National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)” in China (Gu, 2010) and the UK’s V2020 charity’s efforts (V2020) to strengthen communities through leadership, it was clear that the year 2020 stood for exciting targets and high ideals. Looking ahead to the next few years, organisations and governments will aspire once again to bring about positive change, but this will happen in substantially different and perhaps more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments (see VUCA-world, 2020). The future seems less predictable than it was before.

This chapter considers some changes that are occurring as education adapts to new realities and as those involved in language teaching and learning stride forward — or shuffle hesitantly — into the unknown. It highlights the potential to accept and explore the unknown, through processes of inquiry and consideration of desired outcomes. To facilitate this process, the structure of the rest of the chapter is loosely based on a learning design framework developed as a tool for language teachers to help them reflect, innovate and prepare new learning activities to be undertaken with the use of mobile devices (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2015). The original framework is effectively an invitation to teachers to explore how language learners might be guided and supported to undertake ‘inquiries’, defined as

open-ended learning activities that take advantage of opportunities for technology-supported language learning or practice in, and especially beyond, the classroom. The framework assumes that teachers have enough autonomy to be able to do that. Although it is used in this chapter in a different way (not for the design of learning activities, but to consider broader aspects of change), there is a similar goal in terms of undertaking a structured exploration to discover something new. The framework has four key elements:

- Reflection
- Inquiry
- Rehearsal
- Outcomes

There is no required order or sequence to these four elements. Starting with 'reflection' is one possibility, which in this case presents an opportunity to assess how things have been done in the past or up till this moment, to plan for the future or to decide how to proceed. Individuals (language teachers, trainers, instructional designers, researchers and others) can do this kind of reflection themselves, though often they also look to leaders in their educational settings or in communities with which they have an affinity, to guide their thinking and actions.

### **Reflection: Guidance for an unfamiliar terrain**

Language learning with technology as a field of research and practice has established itself as a complex collection of overlapping and interconnected communities across the globe, whose members are largely able to share their knowledge widely, though many are drawn primarily towards interactions and collaborations with colleagues in their own locality. Teachers tend to look to their local or national contexts for guidance on how to use technology in teaching. There are many good reasons for this, including language barriers preventing wider communication. Even technology that looks similar across the world varies considerably in many respects and is closely associated with local ways of using it. On the other hand, it is increasingly important to have a global outlook and an awareness of technology adoption, to be able to consider emerging ideas elsewhere as well as to take advantage of virtual opportunities to cross borders and boundaries when we teach, design materials, research and learn. In the Open University's *Innovating Pedagogy* annual series of reports (<http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/innovating/>), we have partnered with institutes in different countries (US, Singapore, Israel, Norway, Ireland and China) to enable us to provide a rich repertoire of emerging pedagogical innovations (including some specifically related to language learning) and to compel us to communicate their value in a way that can be understood with relative ease.

In Europe, as in many other parts of the world, teachers, researchers, learning designers, application developers and education managers are likely to continue to look to professional associations and trusted agencies or institutes for reliable guidance on worthwhile uses of learning technology and emerging trends. In 2020, in the field of research and practice in learning technology, the UK Association for Learning Technology (ALT) produced a 5-year strategy, launched in February 2020 (ALT, 2020a), which champions openness and includes a key aim to increase the impact of learning technology for public benefit. ALT also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the European Association of Computer Assisted Language Learning (ALT, 2020b) to combine efforts to enhance the understanding and application of learning technology in education and in language learning. By doing so, the two associations signal that collaboration across boundaries and borders will be a preferred way of operating over the next few years.

National education policies and strategies vary in the extent to which they provide direction with respect to integration of technology in education, and specifically in language teaching. A recent high-level advisory joint report from five UK policy and research organisations, 'Towards a national languages strategy: education and skills' (British Academy, 2020), makes no mention of the role or impacts of learning technologies. However, the UK Department for Education's policy paper on 'Realising the potential of technology in education' (Department for Education, 2019) declares support for the education sector to develop and embed technology, so as to cut workload, foster efficiencies, support inclusion and drive improvements in educational outcomes. The paper notes that "It can be difficult for education leaders to separate evidence-based practice and products from a vast range of gimmicks." (p.2). This suggests that researchers should perhaps make greater efforts to interpret for education leaders available and reliable evidence concerning appropriate uses of learning technology in education (Luckin, 2018; Xu et al., 2020) as well as providing evaluation frameworks that will help detect those aforementioned 'gimmicks' (e.g., Herodotou et al., 2019; Rosell-Aguilar, 2017). Guidance on realising the potential of technology needs to come both from inspiring visions and from evidence of what has been shown to work. It should also be underpinned by inquiries into how language and communication are changing and what pedagogical innovation might be needed.

### **Inquiry: Language in emergencies and beyond**

Education systems around the world are for the most part deeply embedded in political, economic, social and cultural structures, with their attendant assumptions and enshrined practices that are hard to change. In contrast, the concept of a 'learning culture' is more malleable, with individuals or groups of participants potentially able to steer or adopt new developments as they wish. Porcu (2017) defines 'innovative learning culture' as:

"a social climate that stimulates people to work and learn together, to grow as an individual and as a group (team, organization), and that provides people with the autonomy needed to be flexible, to experiment, to be creative, and to investigate radical possibilities in order for the organization to have better chances for survival in the long run" (p. 4).

While the context discussed by Porcu is learning among journalists, innovative learning cultures offering a favourable social climate are needed in many spheres of activity, including education. In that spirit of creativity, openness and autonomy, people can initiate inquiries into what changes, if any, teachers and learners might like to see or to introduce.

The changes brought about by the pandemic have been unplanned and unpredictable as to their effects. The switch to online education around the world has been characterized as "haphazard and chaotic" (Williamson et al., 2020), which is clearly not the way anyone would have wished it to be. Nevertheless, there are already suggestions that some practices developed during the pandemic may be beneficial and worth retaining. Two examples offered by Yi and Jang (2020) in relation to South Korea include supporting translingual practices in language learning (such as use of multiple languages in subtitling of videos) and enabling new collaborative teaching configurations thanks to more opportunities for the teachers to discuss their philosophies, methods and materials in the context of remote teaching. Other aspects of the adoption of technologies and methods in language teaching and learning during the pandemic have started to be explored in emerging small-scale studies (e.g., Supriadi et al., 2020; Upor, 2020) that will eventually need to be brought together to show the bigger picture. There are also publications on the effects of the pandemic on e-learning (e.g., Ebner et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2020).

Language comes to the fore in any crisis or emergency, as the ability to comprehend a situation and seek out help or advice becomes a priority. In national health emergencies, as specialist terms begin to feature in the news and unfamiliar words start to make an appearance, everyone is faced with some degree of challenge. In the COVID-19 pandemic, scientific terminology has jostled with layman's terms and culturally specific metaphors that have been used in efforts to explain a new situation to 'everyone'. The meanings of numerous words and expressions are constantly being queried and redefined as citizens grapple with slippery definitions of 'a household', 'a social gathering', 'mingling', 'confinement' and many others. For those who have little or no access to information in their first or preferred language, and cannot check their understanding, the situation is greatly exacerbated. In the pandemic crisis, initiatives providing information and resources in several languages (e.g., Suffolk County Council, 2020), including Indigenous, Endangered and Under-Resourced Languages (ELP, 2020), can be of enormous help.

Willingness to learn other languages in order to understand and communicate with others, rather than predominantly to score highly in tests, is increasingly important in our world where there are constant requirements to share new information and understand people from diverse backgrounds. General benefits of language learning, in terms of academic achievement, improved attitudes to other cultures and development of cognitive abilities are being showcased (ACTFL, 2020; Woll & Wei, 2019), yet arguably there is insufficient inquiry into what motivates learners and what kinds of language learning are not only personally valuable but also have public or societal benefits.

### **Rehearsal: Echoes of the past**

A long-standing challenge in education has been how to move the global enterprise of language learning beyond the familiarity of traditional methods and materials to less explored horizons and unfamiliar ways of teaching and learning that are arguably more fitting for our times. In 2009, I posed the question: "Will mobile learning change language learning?" (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009), at a time when the proliferation of mobile devices along with emerging conceptions of 'learning on the move' had created some opportunities for change yet it was not clear whether these would be realized. The paper emphasized contextual learning outdoors and indoors, and movement between these settings, predicting that we could expect to see more examples of language learning being integrated with everyday life. Home-based learning enhanced by technology seemed to hold some potential for future language learning. The paper went on to say that mobile technologies could support the objective of allowing learners to influence what is learnt and how. It speculated that a key challenge would be to develop designs "that clearly identify what is best learnt in the classroom, what should be learnt outside, and the ways in which connections between these settings will be made" (p. 164).

Mobile learning has indeed changed language learning in many ways, including some ways that were not strongly predicted a decade ago – for example the informal use of social media for everyday language practice and increased exposure to target language use and the use of mobile phones in out-of-class settings to connect students' social mobile use with language learning practices (see Wu & Miller, 2020). Although there are no exact figures for it, it seems that smartphones are now an immensely popular technology for informal language learning and internet-based media are a major resource of content and interaction, often used alongside formal course materials and instruction. Formal education has been more circumspect in exploring mobile learning.

In parallel with the rise of mobile technology adoption, the past decade has seen considerable work in defining principles for mobile learning designs (Elias, 2011; Herrington

et al., 2009; Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2019) that have foregrounded real life relevance, personalisation, and learners as knowledge creators. Over that period, the concept of design for learning with mobiles has widened from its previous institutional focus and should now aim “to embrace the exploitation of the abundance of online digital resources (content, communities and tools)” (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2019, p.182). Such design for learning might be undertaken more autonomously by teachers together with their students. Recently Hall et al. (2020) also proposed a set of principles for innovative mobile learning, designed to challenge existing thinking and practices in digital education. These principles emphasize collaboration, authenticity, adaptivity, mobility and student choice. They reflect key concepts propounded by the mobile learning research community over many years. Such principles make perfect sense to innovators and researchers, yet they can be difficult to implement in teaching practice. Sometimes there is just no time to make changes, as teaching loads and student demands are too high. Therefore, if changes are to be made then those aspects should be the starting point.

### **Outcomes: Open to negotiation**

The underlying philosophical stance in a world in flux is the acceptance of risk, change and uncertainty, especially when learning takes place with everyday personal technologies and outside the classroom. This risk taking is already a challenge in western countries where students are often encouraged to take some responsibility for their own learning, however, in Asian contexts where students rely on teachers for guidance it can be seen as an insurmountable obstacle. When contemplating designing for learning in an uncertain future, Beetham (2013) discussed (from a UK perspective) a range of issues that designers of learning would need to engage with in the upcoming five to ten years. There were technological uncertainties in terms of digital tools available for learning; there was the rise of digital media and web 2.0; personal and social technologies were coming to the fore; and numerous economic and political uncertainties were impacting on learning designs. Implications were explored, and four educational futures were conceived in terms of learning as connectivity, open educational practice, learner-defined contexts, and learning in diverse settings. While most of these have increasingly become reality, learner-defined contexts stood out as being “contentious” and this version of the future is only just beginning to be realised. Learner-defined contexts describe the capacity of individuals to personalise aspects of their experience, including negotiating their own learning goals and desired outcomes. However, some learners might prefer to be told what outcomes to achieve. Alternatively, they may prefer to define their goals and outcomes in collaboration with other learners. Therefore, learner diversity (widely defined) should be added as an important feature of future learning designs.

In a world in which many languages are evolving and changing rapidly in response to factors such as technology use, wider sharing of new information and online encounters among diverse language users, both teachers and learners have to be able to deal with less predictable situations and learning outcomes than has been the case in the past. The corollary of this is that they need to be more aware of their personal agency and encouraged to exercise self-determination in language learning and in the selection and use of multiple technological resources. This perspective emphasises teachers’ and learners’ capacity to become agents of change. However, in reality many are highly constrained by systems of evaluation or assessment as well as available financial resources and time. In many contexts change has to be facilitated by leaders who are able to overcome these barriers.

In a world in which cooperation and collaboration across cultural and linguistic divides is increasingly important, learning outcomes focused on these aspects will be needed, alongside more research on these topics in language learning and intercultural exchange

(Nishio & Nakatsugawa, 2020). In many parts of the world, cultural and linguistic divides exist within a small radius. Responses to the pandemic, particularly in terms of social help and support, have shown how important it is to focus on local issues as much as global ones, yet the common ground is a concern with human relations rather than place.

## Conclusion

In the decade up till 2020 the world seemed to be moving gradually towards a tipping point into ubiquitous mobile learning that appeared to be well aligned with ambitions for transnational educational mobility in increasingly mobile societies (Traxler & Kukulska-Hulme, 2016, p. 208). Mobility can be “a great instigator of change” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010, p. 12), however in the immediate future this driving force will be curtailed. While physical mobilities are temporarily suspended or limited to some degree, other types of mobility should come to the fore, such as temporal and virtual mobilities that can expand horizons and enlarge our social networks and interactions. This may lead to new inquiries into how to use what we have learnt in the current pandemic to develop language learning for other emergencies as well as for times of greater choice, enjoyment and possibility.

In the framework used for this chapter (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2015), teachers are encouraged to rethink their practice in relation to the possibilities offered by mobile devices and the affordances of environments in and beyond the classroom. This includes reorienting teaching and learning towards an inquiry mindset whereby learners (individually or with others) are supported in exploring and rehearsing the target language and where the outcomes are likely to be somewhat different or more open-ended than in more traditional teaching. Although designed for mobile learning, the framework seems to be applicable more broadly to reconsideration of language teaching and learning with technology. It has recently been used to reflect on a project on language teacher education (Bortoluzzi et al., *forthcoming*).

An increasingly international perspective on research in technology and language learning, largely based on publications in English that are accessed on the internet, might suggest that there are common conceptions of the purposes and expected outcomes of technology-based language teaching and learning, but that is hardly the case. Turvey and Pachler (2020) argue for an awareness of the ‘pedagogical provenance’ of research studies, to take account of primary factors such as “teachers’ knowledge, understanding and capabilities in utilising digital tools effectively within teaching and learning”, as well as secondary factors such as “their philosophical attitudes and values when appropriating digital technologies or, their pedagogical values and beliefs more broadly” (para. 1). Almost the same could be said of learners and other stakeholders in educational settings. Provenance and context matter a great deal. Yet we must still try to learn from one another’s experiences of innovations, despite our differences. With perhaps less haste and more time in 2021 and beyond to consider their options, all may look for more considered ways to “step safely into the unknown” (Reeson, 2019).

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