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ICT Affordances and Higher Education

From Face-to-Face to Digital Learning Environments

The use of technological tools as an alternative to or in support of more traditional methods is no longer considered a novelty in the context of language learning (Isaías, Miranda and Pífano 2021; Lai 2017; Li 2017) and its evaluation (Arabaci and Akilli 2021, 116; Purpura, Davoodifard and Voss 2021; Zechner and Evanini 2019; Weiner and Hurtz 2017).

The potential of using digital tools for project-based learning and teaching has long been known. In fact, by the end of the 1980s several Higher Education (HE) programmes started to implement digital tools in their courses, as well as online communication or telecollaboration projects in their curriculum (Warschauer 2001). In those early stages individuals were mostly supposed to receive input, without being able to express any type of feedback. Indeed, it was only with the new generation of digital tools (Web 2.0), described as "network-centric" (Anderson 2008a, 227), that the user-tool interactions acquired new momentum.

Accordingly, the integration of technology into language teaching has been widely studied over the past twenty-five years (Reinders and Pegrum 2015; Chapelle 2011; Holec 2009) and has shown how digital tools can reduce costs and allow for more flexibility of time, place and interaction (Grosseck 2009, 480; Ally 2008). In addition, since they can make learning experiences more accessible (Rogers-Estable 2014), Web 2.0 applications can also contribute to increasing the involvement and interest levels of digital-native students (Ku Tseng and Akarasriworn 2013; Cilliers 2017; Cocciolo 2010; Wheeler 2009).

Although the integration of technology may bring positive effects to teaching and learning by reducing commuting time, increasing flexibility and allowing learners to work at their own pace, the degree of success highly depends on several factors, such as: motivation, content, students, and methodology (McCarthy 1999, 21-22; 1996, 26-27).

The purpose of this special issue is to gather and represent the voices of the actors involved in the training and evaluation process with the intent of taking stock of the current state of the art, evaluate the successes, learn from the failures, and from here onwards start to (re)-design the future of university language courses. Contributions focus on: the adoption of innovative approaches for foreign language distance teaching and learning; the use of digital tools in ESP

courses; syllabus design in distance learning; the assessment of language skills through digital tools.

The first contribution by Bondi and Di Cristofaro describes the tenets and the steps which have led to the creation of the MoReThesisCorpus, composed of the theses submitted to the university of Modena and Reggio Emilia between 2011 and 2020. The authors advocate the use of this corpus to foster research into academic discourse in a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspective (see e.g. contributions in Charles et al. 2009 and in Hyland and Bondi 2006), as well as to focus on second language writing in academic settings. In fact, the MoReThesisCorpus can be used to develop educational materials aimed at university students, and to support the acquisition of discipline-related rhetorical structures and lexico-grammatical resources with a view to facilitating the learning of academic writing (cf. Tribble 2002) through corpus tools and resources (cf. Flowerdew 2015; 2009), following a data-driven learning approach (Chambers 2012).

If it is true that educational institutions must pave the way for the students' learning process (Amoia 2021, 128), it is equally true that any form of teaching must encourage young people to come to terms with reality and social participation. Bearing this in mind, the Language Centre of the University of Urbino, in synergy with the local communities, developed the "Dream Big, Fly High: the English Language as a Bridge to your Dream Job" project. As Rossi points out in her contribution, this is an Orientation and Multifunctional/Soft Skills Scheme consisting of 9 modules, which was meant to help students enhance their own learning zone, by promoting self-determination and self-assessment (Marcarini 2022, 50) and by providing learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes in authentic contexts, in which they learn by doing through direct experience (Richards and Rodgers 2014).

Along the same lines, the Bozen-Meisei Project (BMP) described by Irsara, Lazzeretti and Gatti offered participants an experience of collaborative learning at an international level. BMP encouraged the participants to become intercultural speakers who recognize and appreciate diversity at individual and societal levels, valuing plurilingualism and multilingualism, as English becomes a window on a variety of cultures perhaps geographically distant, but reachable by means of computer technology.

Given that the adoption of technology in teaching has already gone through its infancy stage and was further accelerated as a result of the pandemic crisis, Nervino suggests that teachers should "go where students are," refraining from stretching out the use of those tools for learning activities which do not provide any added value to the students' experience, and embracing more sophisticated tools and activities. Moving forward, the future challenge will be to keep on

experimenting with new tools and collect student feedback.

Indeed, as shown by the results of a post-course questionnaire on language satisfaction administered by Csaki, feedback is extremely valuable and can be a good indicator of the students' improved competencies, when measured quantitively. The author's contribution describes how the integration of digital tools into a course addressed to students of the Language and Law degree programme at the University of Trieste actually paved the way for language improvement through cooperative group presentations of audio and audio-visual texts and listening and dictation-type activities.

A reflection on the use of ICT in an ESP course is provided in Bagni's contribution. It draws on the author's personal experience of designing a syllabus for an undergraduate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course in "Technical English," taught in Blended Learning (BL) modality. In particular, Bagni describes the process of syllabus design, illustrating how ICT tools and particularly online resources were used to carry out a target students' needs analysis and customize the syllabus for a Technical English course.

Needs analysis is also at the basis of the "Smart Languages for Smart Enterprises" (SLfSE) project described by Ficarra. By combining the learning potential of existing open online language resources with original English for Specific Purposes (ESP) materials, its aim is to meet the language learning needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Southern Italy. The language-friendly environment created in the SLfSE platform represents a place free from limitations of space, time and anxiety which will increase motivation in language learning and foster professionals' positive attitude towards international people and situations.

Shifting the focus back to university students, Poppi's paper explores the online practices adopted in a course attended by master students with a view to stimulating the attendees' proactiveness, and in particular their involvement in tasks which encouraged them to develop a capability for using linguistic resources strategically and knowingly, aware of "how meaning potential encoded in English can be realised as a communicative resource" (Widdowson 2003, 177).

The use of corpus linguistics (CL) and corpus-based analyses for pedagogical purposes, with a view to encouraging students to explore language autonomously and draw their own conclusions and considerations is investigated in Marcella's contribution. Her analysis outlines how CL can help learners, with different levels of language proficiency, approach ESP using authentic and concrete examples, and simultaneously lead them to develop new skills which may be integrated within their field of study.

The preoccupation with implementing digital resources and tools is related to the epistemology

of technological approaches to teaching. Over the past twenty years technology has increasingly been seen as a solution to declining standards in education with its promise of better presentations of content or the enabling of increased interactivity in HE classrooms (Angeli and Valanides 2009; Fitch 2004). However, at times it was the innovative nature of the tool itself which was central rather than the learning process (Hartle 2022; Mishan 2016; Motteram 2011). Novelty, in fact, should be related to clear, learning-centred affordances which are used both for teaching/learning and assessing purposes. Indeed, as Hartle claims, since online teaching is increasingly becoming part and parcel of the educational repertoire, the challenge ahead is to integrate both the formative and the summative assessment in a new form of blended learning (BL) for the future.

The final contribution by Pelleriti investigates a particular aspect of language testing, item writing, which can be creative, rewarding but also challenging and sometimes frustrating. In fact, the selection of quality items, which are fundamental for test validity, can prove particularly challenging when the testees are, for example, dyslexic students. This contribution analyses some items specifically written for dyslexic students as part of a high-stakes, Internet-based B1 English test administered to undergraduate students in an Italian university. This takes the view to ascertaining whether or not the accommodations suggested by the item reviewer succeeded in removing unnecessary barriers which represent an unintended bias, while preserving the test construct and consequently its validity (Pelleriti 2018; Kormos and Smith 2012).

The ultimate goal of this special issue was to encourage the sharing of ideas and pedagogical thoughts that can contribute to enhancing learners' ability to act autonomously in the fascinating area of language learning. All the contributions focused on the role of innovation in language learning and teaching and pictured different university contexts where language professionals constantly design and create activities that pave the way for the empowerment of existing didactic resources. This, in turn, contributes to the development of better language learners who are ready to become protagonists in the language classroom.

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