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Alina-Andreea Dragoescu Urlica[1]
Sandra Stefanovic
Lulzime Kamberi
Marta Boguslawska-Tafelska

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ECOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE EMERGING DIGITAL LANDSCAPES

Abstract: *This paper aims to examine language learning and communication modalities in the emerging digital educational spaces used by undergraduate students from Banat's University "King Michael I of Romania" from Timisoara, Romania, University of Tetovo, North Macedonia, and Lomza University in Poland during the academic year 2021-2022. Particularly, the use of digital platforms provided for online schooling during the pandemic is analysed based on feedback from students participating in online English classes. The purpose of the study is to reveal the specific modalities available for collaborative learning communities, as well as the challenges faced by both learners and educators and the viability of maintaining ecological multimodal dialogues.*

The paper explores how online classes are able to mobilize students in digital spaces to enable the development of language learning, as well as soft skills promoting communicative competence, while also maintaining the need for visibility within distance education. The analysis uses a multimethod approach, on the one hand theoretically grounded in ecolinguistics and ecosemiotics (evolving from semiosphere theory) by investigating digital practices and, on the other hand, experimental-based qualitative analysis examining the feedback collected from students through surveys conducted anonymously. Ultimately, the discussion aims at enhancing genuine interactive openness and plurivocal dialogue which valorizes identity formation, from a quality-based and ethical perspective.

Keywords: *English language learning; Quality ethics; Digital education; Communicative competence; Ecolinguistics.*

1. Introduction

The study inquires into the possibilities of optimizing practice-oriented language learning in the new topologies of the information society. The literature review tracks recent analyses of digital education, as well as developmens from the fields of ecolinguistics, semiotics, and the connectivist approach to language learning as resources for modeling the students' communicative competencies. The ways current digitalization is reshaping reciprocal relations brings about the construction of new collectivities that enable more autonomous learning agency, but also run

[1] Corresponding author: Alina-Andreea Dragoescu Urlica
Email: alina.urlica@usab-tm.ro

the risk of fostering a surrogate for genuine social experience. Students become more responsible for accessing knowledge and conducting their own learning, but they should also be encouraged to do so via technology without restricting living processes such as speaking, seeing, being seen, despite digital constraints upon embodied presence.

Whereas the new virtual modalities of learning are restricted to just a fraction of the entire array of modalities available in the ecosphere, this niche does present us with a greater potential to fulfill ecolinguistic aspirations of extended non-locality in communication (Bogusławska-Tafelska, 2013; Cowley, 2014). In this context, the ecolinguistic model of multimodal communication offers an expanded perspective on the current generation of communicators who are taking full advantage of the new media and internet-mediated channels (Dragoescu Urlica & Bogusławska-Tafelska, 2021).

Our research hypothesis postulates that this transition may be providing the opportunity for evolving past traditional interpersonal communication, which may not be a regression, but on the contrary, an extended platform for multimodal affordances (Bogusławska-Tafelska, 2017). In the new digital space, the repertoire of communicative modalities have become extended beyond the linear, face-to-face classical communication processes, into non-local and "multimodality communication" mechanisms (Boguslawska-Tafelska, 2013; 2015; 2016).

We suggest that the new modalities may preserve the ecology of the learning environment by preserving some basic conditions for communication: showing up, having a face, being with others, taking the responsibility of sharing the learning experience, learning how to remain open in the new digital landscape. The architecture of this new space for learning must also enable learners to be themselves and to become better communicators focused on personal growth. Embracing complexity and self-regulation, as well as the acquisition of transversal competences across subject areas have also become crucial to maintaining a sustainable ecology of learning, as evidenced by Reșceanu & Tilea (2020) and Reșceanu (2020).

2. Methodology

2.1. Aims and methods

The paper makes a theoretical contribution to ecolinguistics by adding a new proposal to enlarge the "ecology of communication" we have previously developed (Dragoescu Urlica & Stefanović, 2018; Dragoescu Urlica et al., 2018), so as to include virtual landscapes. Furthermore, it discusses preliminary results of an empirical analysis of our digital focus groups, which enables us to make propositions regarding the optimization of virtual English teaching and learning.

By resourcing complex psychological and methodological support for virtual learners, we may hopefully be able to contribute to the development of coherent communicative networks. This is best achieved through the study of English as a foreign language (EFL), which provides opportunities to interdependently construct semiotic relationships, as well as relational feedback. Coherent feedback generation may be seen as an indicator of the degree of communicative proficiency. Thus, particular attention is also paid to the interpretation of the students' feedback regarding their experience of EFL learning via digital platforms.

2.2. Participants

Observation and empirical-based analysis was conducted in online English learning groups of students ranging from 1st year B2-level learners to 4th year C2 level students

(ages 18-24) at the USAMVB University from Timisoara, Romania, the English Language and Literature Department, at the University of Tetovo from North Macedonia, and the University of Applied Sciences in Lomza, Poland.

Feedback was collected in compliance with ethical guidelines, by means of a questionnaire to which the participants responded anonymously regarding online language classes held via digital platforms during March-June 2021. The findings collected from 64 respondents informed our comparative analysis, helping us assess the students' perceptions of the process of English language learning and communication in the new type of virtual spaces. The analysis we have conducted also looks at the feedback on efficiency, limitations, and other recommendations made by the learners.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Digital multimodalities in the new language learning environment

We are witnessing a global shift which is leading to a transgression of linear thinking, as well as spatial limitations. Learners are no longer limited by given areas which must be inside the physical academe, as the latter is extending beyond material bases. Now we can join together in a shared space irrespective of how far we are and we become more focused on establishing connections in the sphere of meaning at a more primal level. Thus, there is a new ground for development of consciousness from fixed to volatile spaces, which provides a dense architecture for the new mode of communication.

The digital rationality highlights values such as connectivity, as it unveils a transdisciplinary potential of replacing the old reductionist and materialist culture (Finke, 2018). In this highly networked environment, we may preserve vital elements of ecological communication and interaction by drawing not only on ecolinguistics, but also on connectivism. Networked learning draws on ideas from both complexity and self-organization theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2017), as it promotes the growth of integrated communicative connections.

Initially devised by Siemens (2004) as a learning theory for distance learning in higher education, it may be of far greater use as we are enforcing virtual or hybrid schooling systems. It also impacts the way social interaction is carried out and how language is produced, exchanged and understood, in our particular case of EFL and ESP. Besides traditional qualitative and quantitative types of knowledge, connectivism also relies on distributed knowledge, which is a highly 'connective' in nature, as it is "distributed across a network of connections and knowledge nodes" (Downes, 2008; 2012). This trend is best supported by connectivist theories of learning, also known as networked learning, which has been gaining ground in higher education. Moreover, the production of meaning and communication modalities have largely been impacted by the spread of emerging digital technologies.

As a result, the semiosphere may now be expanded into the readily accessible dimension of the noosphere, provided educators are aware of the possibilities made available by the new virtual landscapes for achieving a holistic experience of communication. The digital sociocultural ecology provides holistic conditions like shared platforms, flexibility, and openness of the learning experience. Thereby, the new multimodal communicative pathways may facilitate a new stage of human evolutionary development that has reached the highest level of connectiveness so far.

Research into how the Internet is enhancing communities indicates that the new medium provides a type of connectivity which adds on to other forms of communication, rather

than replacing them. Also, it is apt to foster civic involvement through what has been called "networked individualism" rather than locally restricted solidarities (Wellman et al., 2003). In this new context, the ecological concept of 'affordance' is put to a new use in describing 'action possibilities' in information and communications technology (Wellman et al., 2003).

Multimodal language learning practices which employ new digital modes of communication are currently reshaping meaning in different ways (Kress, 2010; Luke, 2003). The total change from traditional types of collaborative learning to novel interactive dimensions reflects a genuine "shift from groups to networks" (Crook, 2008). By giving rise to new learning environments, digital technologies bring about new opportunities to switch from traditional processes to novel networking dynamics (Burden et al., 2012; Wellman et al., 2003).

3.2. The new digital semiosphere

The new digital culture of worldwide universitiesis is becoming significantly different from traditional linear culture, as it opens up towards much larger, often intercultural communities, which may bring hope for a future grand unification of evolved understanding, in a truly 'integrative age' (Scott, 2000). As communication has embraced intercultural and cross-cultural dimensions, this also implies learning to understand how people from different cultures perceive the world (Iosim, 2019).

The opening and widening of participation to meaning-making and new applications of digital education to wider constitutencies via the Internet has the potential to bring more communicators into coherence. It may be possible that new sign systems provide additional dimensions for extending communicational modalities, as it has been suggested (Bogusławska-Tafelska, 2015). However, we must be heedful that exploring these new avenues of openness in the modern university may largely impact many other aspects beyond education – the way we communicate, present ourselves, and face the others in the public sphere. According to Lotman (1990), socio-cultural semiotic systems are 'immersed' within the 'semiotic space' and can only work through interaction with the semiotic space: "The unit of semiosis, the smallest functioning mechanism, is not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question" (Lotman, 1990).

Thus, "semiosphere is a sphere of semiosis and an experience thereof; and as such, it is a prerequisite for any single act of communication to be interpreted as one" (Kotov & Kull, 2011). Moreover, the socio-cultural semiosphere, which comprises the entire society, is autopoietic, self-referential and based on its own code. Communication consists of mental, organic, and environmental links via semiosis; as a result, fields like biology and linguistics become related to each other through semiotics (Velmezova et al., 2015). Given that communication is essentially based on semiotic processes, all organisams can rely on semiosis to carry out interactions, as shown by biosemiotics (Cobley, 2013).

3.3. Applications to our case study

In this context, we are looking for ways of transitioning to a 'virtual ecology' as sustainably as possible, in order to maintain the essential features of a learning community, for the purpose of which we draw up some proposals to improve the existing situation.

Our survey confirms that learning and communication are largely impacted by digital technology, which has completely reframed the way we live, as much as the way we learn. Looking at the bright side which is also applicable to our case, several advantages are entailed by the transformational potential of the new digital

medium of learning. Skills such as 'multiprocessing' or decoding multimedia texts, and a growing capacity to interpret multiple-media genres should not be discounted (Brown, 2002).

Another important shift revolving around the evolution of literacy is that it has expanded to include 'screen literacy' (Brown, 2002). Regarding the need to acquire basic technicalities of digital communication literacy, Nelson et al. (2011) suggest that the new digital generation of students cannot truly be considered 'digitally literate', even if they 'live and breathe technology'. It is questionable to assume that students who have been 'born digital', having directly experienced a digital reality (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) do not have to learn digital literacy skills, but have a ready-made propensity for digitalization.

The great majority of answers provided by students in the three academic institutions converge in the same direction, in proportions around 90%. Thus, as seen from the average results we have each collected, most students think it is preferable to keep their cameras on, for various reasons. More than half (57%) thought it is an essential aspect for enabling real communication between participants. One person stated that "students who do not open their camera are not attentive" and teachers have also confirmed this to be the case more often than not. As regards the reasons for not keeping cameras open, despite being aware of its relevance (as seen from the feedback cited above), most students reported various reasons for preferring to keep them closed. Only one person argued for the protection of personal privacy, while 20% argued that they simply felt 'uncomfortable'.

Even though many students agree that they should keep cameras open because this enables them to participate, communicate, and learn better overall, others argued that "we should turn our cameras on, but sometimes it depends on our rooms situation" or "it helps us focus better on the lesson and it helps the teachers too because they don't feel they are talking to the walls". As for the motivation students invoked for closing cameras, which happens more often than it would appear from their considerate responses, out of those who prefer not opening cameras and/or microphones, 50% prefer "to stay in a comfortable position, eat or do other things", 25 % have siblings or other persons in the room during classes, while 25% opted for "other reasons".

Several students reported that they are also carrying out other activities during classes; one student mentioned that s/he is "usually tired" and does not "feel comfortable talking". Some students close their cameras only occasionally or for a few minutes, in case they had many classes before English or a "long and stressful day", when they "prefer to stay a bit with the camera closed, but not for a long time".

This response suggested a reasonable solution to improve reactions to the teacher's annoying encouragement of opening the cameras: when students were told they could choose to close their cams when they wished to have a short time-out, this proved to be efficient because they understood they were expected back when they felt they could regain focus. Other reasons students reported under the option "other" pertained to personality traits such as sociability, shyness, etc., which are all aspects that fall within communicative competences, that we need to address in a future study under the larger umbrella of EQ and 'soft skills'.

For this purpose, we nee to research into the qualities teachers may develop in order to support their students' emotional wellbeing and the affective ecology of the new type of learning. Cozma (2015) points to issues relating to the affective ecology of the English language class, emphasizing the importance of positive features such as authenticity, openness, and empathetic affective support that students need in any learning environment.

3.4. Limits and discussions

The problem of both the constructive and destructive influence of information and the increasing level of virtualization and fragmentation of consciousness are perceived as factors resulting from the formation of mass consumption culture (Yurkiv & Krasnova, 2021). The new ontologies generated along with the deployment of technological culture, besides various problems of differentiating meaning which we are currently facing, may leave some of our potentials unexpressed. In the semiotic tradition, communication relies on sign and sense multimodalities. For instance, Jakobson (Torop, 2005) points to the difference between homogeneous messages, i.e. those based on a single sign system, and syncretic messages, i.e. those based on the combination of several sign systems. The author especially highlights the semiotic value of all five senses in human interaction as carriers of semiotic functions (Torop, 2005). Digitalisation has left us glued to our chairs in very restricted spatial confines.

Moreover, we are in danger of resorting to oversimplified models for approaching the new reality of communication, which is subject to significant denaturalizing consequences. To avoid these traps, we need to focus on building a set of skills that should be comprehended in a wider sense than merely developing 'digital literacy': prioritizing and discriminating the quality of information, sustainable knowledge management, and nurturing a flexible mindset that is also adaptable to the fluctuating digital world, all of which could be included in the list of ecological soft skills.

Finally, another limitation is the problem of direct plagiarism, which teachers can rarely identify in instant oral feedback. These issues require ethical education courses, as well as coverage of intellectual property and academic responsibility practices.

4. Conclusion

Although we have analyzed numerous studies of digital education or blended learning which take various standpoints, the main approaches we have identified majority in this area are either statistically-based or significance-oriented. It is the latter that we have chosen for the specific qualitative purposes of the present analysis. In response to our working hypothesis, there is reason to hope that the ecology of learning can still be preserved, as it is facilitated by the "shift between using technology to support the individual to using technology to support relationships between individuals" (Brown, 2002).

Also, by resourcing complex psychological and methodological support for virtual learners, we may hopefully be able to contribute to the development of coherent communicative networks. This is best achieved through the study of English as a foreign language (EFL), which provides opportunities to interdependently construct semiotic relationships, as well as relational feedback. Coherent feedback generation may be seen as an indicator of the degree of communicative proficiency, which is one of the main reasons for undertaking this pilot study. Thus, particular attention must also be paid to the interpretation of the students' feedback regarding their experience of EFL learning via digital platforms.

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Alina-Andreea Dragoescu Urlica
USAMVB "King Michael I of Romania", Timisoara, Romania
alina.urlica@usab-tm.ro

Marta Boguslawska-Tafelska
Lomza State University of Applied Sciences,
Poland
martaboguslawska@o2.pl

Sandra Stefanovic
Faculty of Engineering,
University of Kragujevac,
Serbia

sandra_stef@yahoo.com

Lulzime Kamberi
University of Tetovo,
Tetovo, Republic of
North Macedonia,
l.kamberii12@gmail.com