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“A Terrible Beauty Is Born”: Opportunities
and New Perspectives for Online Teaching and Assessment

“Nasce una terribile bellezza”: opportunità
e nuove prospettive per la didattica e la valutazione online

Edited by

Franca Poppi and Josef Schmied

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Editorial

“A Terrible Beauty Is Born”: Opportunities and New Perspectives for Online Teaching and Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Even though the use of digital tools as an alternative to or in support of more traditional methods is no longer considered a novelty in the context of language learning, as a consequence of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, what used to be an opportunity was transformed into a pressing and inevitable necessity that led all the actors involved in the training and evaluation process to radically change their way of teaching and assessing. Within a matter of days, educators around the world scrambled to shift their practice from in-person to remote teaching. The need to maintain social distancing prompted the transition to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Even though globally the emergency posed by Covid-19 popularized ERT as a temporary intervention to complete a higher education academic year, ERT has undoubtedly proved to be a feasible alternative for “students unconventionally dispersed, either locally or abroad, when only limited contact to educational facilities and instructional materials for their learning needs is available” (Nokukhanya *et al.* 2021, 9). Indeed, since in remote teaching the participants in the communicative act mainly interact via a screen, and sometimes even without full access to video facilities, at times there may be the tendency to de-emphasize person-to-person contact. Therefore, if we want remote teaching to provide new opportunities and stimuli in the future, it is essential to draw on the examples of good practice emerged during the pandemic, bearing in mind that teachers and educators should first and foremost promote interactive activities at the most efficient and realizable rate, with a view to encouraging the attendees’ motivation and participation.

Keyword: digitalization; digital tools; emergency remote teaching; language teaching; learners' needs.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE DIGITAL “REVOLUTION”

The digitalization of communication from email to social media has attracted public awareness in the last decades. Over the last few years, professional communication has clearly moved in the digital direction and made remote online collaboration natural: online language tools like Zoom for communication, Google Docs for collaborative writing, and DeepL for translation had already made their way into modern language services earlier on. What may have attracted less public awareness is the digitalization of language teaching and learning that developed parallel to the digitalization of communication. Foreign language teachers and learners had become accustomed in theory and practice to certain e-Learning concepts that had developed in the 1960s but gained momentum in the 1990s with the advent of the World-Wide Web (Warschauer 1996). Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) developed under various names, from Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), etc. Thus today the use of digital tools as an alternative to or in support of more traditional methods is no longer considered a novelty in the context of language learning (Chalhoub-Deville 1999; Chapelle 2001; Holec 2009; Guichon 2012; Reinders and Pegrum 2015; Lai 2017) and its evaluation (Fulcher 1998; Gershon 2005; Chapelle, Cotos, and Lee 2015; Ketab, Clarke, and Haskell-Dowland 2015; Purpura, Davoodifard, and Voss 2021).

However, the recent global situation transformed an opportunity into a pressing and inevitable necessity that led all the actors involved in the training and evaluation process to radically change their way of teaching and assessing (cf. Radić *et al.* 2021). All of a sudden, what had so far been considered to be ‘normal’ was destabilized or disrupted by the pandemic. Technology solutions had to be adopted to save the whole education system, as teachers reinvented themselves in a period which catalyzed a new era in virtual language learning and teacher professional development (Copeland *et al.* 2021). In some cases, it was possible to move classes effectively to online and distance education platforms because of pre-existing experience, but in others, all the involved stakeholders had to strive to cope and manage the ‘new normal’. And this new normal was called Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Trust and Whalen 2021).

2. EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING

The term ERT is normally used to refer to the rapid and unexpected shift from in-person to online or remote teaching due to unforeseen circumstances such as natural disasters, or, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, a global health crisis. ERT differs from traditional online or distance learning in that it is not planned or designed ahead of time, but rather a response to an emergency situation that forces educators to quickly adapt their teaching methods to an online format. This sudden shift can represent significant challenges for both teachers and students, including access to technology, internet connectivity (therefore inclusion), and above all adapting to new teaching and learning environments. Due to its very nature, ERT has sometimes been looked down on, because it was considered nothing more than a “temporary solution to an immediate problem” (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020, ii).

But now, paradoxically, amidst the ghastly months of the pandemic, a “terrible beauty was born”, as W.B. Yeats wrote in 1916. The 1916 Easter rising, despite its disastrous result, brought about a radical change in the minds of Irish people, enhancing their love for their land. In the same way, teachers and educators all over the world have now come to realize that the online activities they were compelled to deploy because of the contingent situation may provide them with new opportunities and ways of working in the future.

In fact, even though overall ERT presented significant challenges for teachers, by addressing these challenges, it was possible to provide quality education also during emergency situations, taking advantage of the many benefits that online teaching and learning offer, such as increased flexibility, access to a wider range of resources, and the ability to personalize learning experiences for students. One of the first challenges to tackle was connected with the features of the new teaching and learning environment: ERT requires teachers to adapt their teaching methods and instructional strategies to an online format, which can be challenging and time-consuming (Moser, Wei, and Brenner 2020; Popa *et al.* 2020). In addition, educators also have to maintain student engagement and motivation. In fact, online learning can be isolating and the lack of the social interactions and support that are present in traditional classroom settings can make it difficult for teachers to maintain student engagement and motivation (Wiederhold 2020; van der Bom and Pfundt 2021; Walters *et al.* 2022). Finally, it was obviously necessary to ensure assessment and evaluation validity. To such an extent, ERT may require

the use of different assessment methods and tools than traditional classroom settings, and teachers had to ensure that assessments were valid and reliable.

3. OUTLINE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue is a collection of the contributions presented at the 2021 seminar of the Associazione Italiana Centri Linguistici Universitari (AICLU) held in Modena in September 2021 and organized by the Language Centre of the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia. The seminar highlighted the efforts made by various Italian university language centres in response to the unprecedented challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced a rapid shift to online teaching and learning.

The presentations delivered on the occasion of the seminar showcased the creative and innovative ways in which language centres adapted to the evolving situation, turning necessity into virtue. This issue of the journal, therefore, brings together a diverse range of articles, case studies and research findings from the event, offering valuable insights into the strategies, methodologies, and tools employed by language centres across Italy to ensure the continuity of language education.

This issue contains contributions that discuss:

- the rapid transformation from in-person to remote language teaching, detailing the challenges faced by educators and learners, as well as the solutions developed to address these issues;
- innovative pedagogical approaches and methodologies, including flipped classrooms and project-based learning, which were successfully implemented to promote engagement and collaboration in the online environment;
- the use of digital tools and resources, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing platforms, and mobile applications to increase teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction in language practice;
- the impact of remote language teaching on student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes, as well as the role of feedback and assessment in the online context;
- lessons learned and best practices for the future language teaching and learning, drawing from the experiences of educators and institutions during the pandemic.

4. THE CONTRIBUTIONS

In a context like today's, where education increasingly aims to promote active student participation in the teaching process, moving away from anachronistic concepts that saw the teacher as a mere dispenser of knowledge, efforts should be made to adopt tools that are endowed with pedagogical potential. One of these tools is Moodle, an open-source LMS first developed in 2001. The design of Moodle is based on the principles of social constructivism (Palincsar 1998; Powell and Kalina 2009), which means that it is centred on learners and their ability to actively build up knowledge (Helling and Petter 2012; Smith, Nash, and Rice 2018). In Moodle, learners are offered two types of tools, resources and activities: the former are files or links giving access to digital learning contents, while the latter are interactive items which allow students to carry out a variety of tasks (Cole and Foster 2007; Badia, Martín, and Gómez 2019), like, for example, written assignments. Caleffi's contribution investigates the differences between 100 assignments completed during several exam sessions by students at the University of Bologna. Half of the assignments were computer-typed on the Moodle platform, whereas the other half were handwritten. By means of a linguistic feature analysis, the study provides quantitative and qualitative data for a comparison between the type of errors in the CB (Computer-Based) and PB (Paper-Based) assignments respectively, for the purpose of assessing the impact of the writing modality on the quality of EFL writing. Also Tenca's contribution focuses on Moodle and in particular on the results of a small-scale study on learners' output obtained through an asynchronous writing activity completed in a Moodle forum during an English course targeting students of Primary Teacher Education at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia in spring 2020. The analysis focuses on the learners' use of modal and semi-modal verbs when writing about topics relevant to their disciplinary and professional domain. The results, which show the students' preference for modals and semi-modals expressing obligation, can help develop resources and strategies to be incorporated in a more conscious, organic, and learner-centred manner into the design of future courses. The Moodle platform takes centre stage again in Pettinelli and Rauch's contribution, which focuses on a specific tool called 'Feedback', provided in the 'Quiz' and 'Forum' modules. In the authors' view this tool can make up for inevitable communicative shortcomings that arise when operating in remote teaching contexts, by creating a relationship of trust, respect and attention between the involved parties, as the teachers

willingly put themselves in the student's shoes and try to understand how he/she sees the world, so as to adequately appreciate the cognitive efforts that are made, without stigmatizing failures (Falcinelli *et al.* 2016). The 'Feedback' tool enables the teacher to take on the role of facilitator of the learning process, while the students can acquire greater autonomy in learning and self-assessment, without reducing the interaction between teacher and learner. In fact, by means of this function, the authors were able to add formative and reflective comments for each possible answer given by the students, thus fostering motivation, stimulating metalinguistic awareness, elucidating certain morphosyntactic structures or communicative functions, in online courses of Italian language at the University of Perugia.

Gamification of language materials was used by Cerizza and Gilardoni to increase the interaction and motivation of individual learning (Schmied 2023) when teaching Italian courses at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milano. In particular, the analysis shows that by using in a playful manner technological tools that are now within everyone's reach, it is possible to increase interaction in language teaching practice. The activities described show their effectiveness in prompting the participation of the learners called upon to experience the language through task-based activities that made it possible to work on various aspects, such as the linguistic-communicative, the socio-cultural and also the metacognitive one, developing a predisposition to autonomous study. Co-operation, aimed at achieving a concrete goal according to set rules, stimulated the learners' creativity and guided them to serenely experience victories and defeats in a context of mutual respect. Sepè's contribution reports on an experimental course devised at the Language Centre of the University of Basilicata for the online teaching of the Italian language to incoming Erasmus students. In particular, the pedagogical framework adopted made it possible to use online technologies not only to improve the students' disciplinary competences, but also their media awareness, as well as other more general skills, which were called upon while they were actively participating in the learning experiences that were implemented. Dimov and Mutti report on the activities carried out under the auspices of the Marco Polo - Turandot Project at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia while providing Italian as a Second Language courses for young-adult Chinese students. WeChat, a messaging service developed in China proved to be an effective tool for communicating with the students in China and for coordinating activities, sending notices, teaching materials and lesson recordings;

while Lark, a free communication and collaboration platform similar to other platforms like Google Workspace, was used during the online lessons. Although Lark is generally employed in professional contexts, it proved exceedingly useful for the purpose of language teaching, and thanks to its widespread diffusion in China, could ensure the stability of the connection between China and Italy during the lessons. While WeChat was used to interact with Chinese students who were learning Italian, other applications like Zumpad.de, bloochat.com, Thema, Signal or Telegram were adopted in a German Language and Translation course for students at the University of Foggia, as described in Catone's contribution. In particular, the author shows examples of chat interaction, error correction and concrete teaching activities supplemented by targeted use of corpora and digital lexicographic resources, which stimulated the learners' creative reasoning, while paving the way for conscious forms of autonomy.

Alongside chats and online platforms, e-books can also be used as containers for storytelling projects or other forms of collective and collaborative writing. Bookcreator is the application for creating digital books, which was employed in the design, planning and realization of a collective project in 2020 at the University of Bologna Language Centre. Christiany and Heumann report on how the adoption of this tool stimulated digital storytelling, the narration by means of digital tools, and resulted in the creation of an e-book. This project has shown that it is not only possible to convey linguistic notions with digital tools, but also to increase motivation, creativity and autonomy to experiment with language. Of course, ERT is not a substitute for in-person teaching and learning, and its effectiveness may vary depending on the context and resources available. As such, it is important to carefully evaluate and assess the outcomes and impacts of ERT to inform future emergency response planning and ongoing efforts to improve teaching and learning in online and remote settings. This is what Ennis, Unterkoffer and Bonetto planned to do when they administered a series of surveys to students, to monitor the efficacy of the courses offered remotely during the 2020/21 academic year at the Language Centre of Libera Università di Bolzano, with a view to informing decisions regarding which courses would continue to be taught fully or partially online in the years to come. In fact, despite its challenges, ERT provided opportunities for teachers and educators to explore new and innovative ways to deliver content and engage students in a remote or online setting. It accelerated the adoption of digital tools and technologies for teaching and learning, which may

have lasting impacts on education even once the emergency situation has passed. It also raised interest within many interdisciplinary fields. In particular, in the field of education, where it may prove particularly interesting to report on teachers' and students' experiences (e.g., Hoti, Dragusha, and Ndou 2022). Finally, since ERT was primarily centred on short-term outcomes to be achieved in the digital learning context, it might involve the attendant risk of marginalising learners' needs in the long run (Xiao 2021). Researchers and educators are now aware of these limitations, and they are devising strategies to support students in achieving academic success in the "new normal" (Callo and Yazon 2020; Hew *et al.* 2020; Xiao 2021). The final study by Iori provides a further contribution to the field of education by exploring students' experience in an English language course organized at the Language Centre at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia during the 2020/21 academic year. More specifically, it aims to focus on how interactions were accomplished in foreign language virtual classrooms and whether students' perceptions on online teaching changed with ERT. Results showed that although students still preferred face-to-face lessons, they highly appreciated specific tools of online teaching (e.g., recordings) and wished they could be implemented in traditional lessons. The data also confirmed the importance of interactions in foreign language virtual classrooms and showed that most students who had an overall negative experience with online teaching were also students who had difficulties in interacting within the virtual classrooms.

5. CONCLUSIONS

All the studies in this volume document the inventiveness of language centres and foreign language practitioners in their specific emergency situations during the pandemic. However, they are also a collection of ideas that may serve as a new starting point for innovation and change. The terrible crisis also led to a new awareness of opportunities and new perspectives in language teaching and assessing that are worth thinking about: Will the quick and easy digital access to breakout rooms make short-term group work a standard feature of interactive language tasks? Will the new necessity to consider open-book exams make assessment more realistic? Will the legal and ethical constraints of remote testing force many final classes back into the classroom? Will new forms of blended learning be established? Will professional

language service providers be integrated remotely into realistic classroom work? etc. Sometimes we have to be forced to see the beauty that we had not expected or to appreciate the efficiency of digital real-life exposure in the classroom that we might not have dared. We hope that readers can enjoy this collection not only to be proud of what they and their colleagues achieved, but also to take the successful inventiveness of others as encouragement to use the new opportunities themselves in online teaching and assessment.

We believe that this special issue not only serves as testament to the resilience and resourcefulness of the Italian university language centres during challenging times, but also inspires educators and institutions to continue exploring innovative approaches to language teaching and learning in the digital age.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the contributors and participants of the 2021 AICLU seminar in Modena for their valuable insights, experiences, and commitment to advancing the field of language education. We trust that the content of this special issue will stimulate further discussion and development in the field of online language teaching and learning.

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