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Teaching/learning a language:
Some considerations on roles
and paradigms in the digital age
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Abstract

This paper is part of an ongoing study that aims to investigate the role of (e)motivation in relation to empowerment in teaching/learning English L2 in global contexts where the impact of the marketisation of academic knowledge, prompted by new epistemological and educational paradigms (see Weik 2014; Peter, Fanghanel 2016), can be observed in the promotion of customised courses fitting in with the demands of the job market, identification of cross-curricular and interdisciplinary learning pathways, and teaching/learning English in many national university environments where English is not the official language. With this in mind, the focus of the present investigation is on the roles of learner and teacher and paradigms of education in the digital age. It opens with reflections on the guidelines set up in EU and UN documents mainly as regards the social dimension of languages and then moves on to an exploration of the conditions to meet the demands required to fulfil roles in society.

Learning a language allows the acquisition of a new capacity to look at reality and may provide tools for entering new professional areas. The present study focuses on reflections on teaching/learning a language, especially English L2, as far as concerns new roles for the teacher and the learner and new paradigms in new global contexts. It starts from considerations on the social dimension of languages as a central element for communication in different contexts, both to reach objectives and for the creation of social relationships. The role of languages is crucial in social contexts as regards the creation and maintenance of social relationships and the performance of duties in work settings. Languages behave as open doors into pathways of integration as they help acquire a sense of belonging to a community and provide skills for the needs required to perform professional roles. In addition, in processes of teaching/learning, language helps develop a sense of reality of a language-culture and raise motivation. Enhanced motivation encourages and facilitates learning/teaching, in particular English L2, and the appropriation of discursive practices of communities thus favouring the acquisition of skills and competences to face new contexts in the new study/work scenarios.

The need for languages in new work contexts was highlighted in 2008 by the EU through identification of a comprehensive strategy for multilingualism as a primary objective for social growth and networking in the third millennium, with a special focus on “[i]nvestment in skills and skills upgrading” as “crucial factors for growth and jobs, and language skills [...] a crucial part of the deal”¹, besides pointing at citizens as intercultural mediators/resources, and focusing on multilingualism as a primary objective to achieve “unity in diversity” and mutual understanding in global contexts².

The role of languages in the third millennium had been pointed out a few months before in the UN motto “Languages matter!”, which was chosen for UNESCO’s IYL mobilisation campaign “aiming to raise awareness, worldwide, on the strategic value of language for peace and sustainable development”³.

¹ Why and where do languages matter? Towards a comprehensive strategy for multilingualism. Ministerial Conference on “Promoting Multilingualism: a shared commitment” Brussels, 15 February 2008. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-08-83_en.pdf. Last accessed: 25 July 2016.

² Brussels debate on “Multilingualism – a bridge or a barrier for intercultural dialogue?”. Debate for the 2008 European Year for Intercultural Dialogue. Brussels, 10 September 2008. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-08-414_en.pdf. Last accessed: 25 July 2016.

³ On 16 May 2007, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2008 the International Year of Languages (IYL). Governments, United Nations organisations, civil society

Language was designated the essence of any kind of communication, and communication the vehicle for the promotion of change and development in human society. The UN document also pointed at languages as “a tool for social integration; or to explore the relationship between languages and the economy, languages and indigenous knowledge or languages and creation”.

The need for languages in new study/work scenarios appears to fit in with the strategic goal that the EU had set for itself a few years before to face “the shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy”⁴. Since the changes resulted to affect every aspect of people’s lives a radical transformation of the European economy was found to be necessary. Therefore, a strategic goal was set for the European Union “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (Decision No 1298/2008/EC (6)), highlighting the political-economic dimension of the supranational institution alongside the social dimension especially aiming at “widen[ing] access for those from disadvantaged groups and address[ing] the special learning needs of people with disabilities” (Decision No 1298/2008/EC (15)) and the socio-political dimension aiming at stepping up “Community efforts to promote dialogue and understanding between cultures world-wide” (Decision No 1298/2008/EC (11))⁵. The new strategic goal fits in with the new socio-political-economic scenario that necessitates different approaches in education to teaching/learning as well. In moving from an information-based to an innovation-based economy in the 21st century, learning is no longer the acquisition of facts, notions and procedures, it is rather about the process of integrating and using knowledge (Fadel, Honey, and Pasnik 2007). This new way of viewing learning draws on a new theory of “successful intelligence” as the “ability

organisations, educational institutions, professional associations and all other stakeholders were “invited” “to increase their own activities to foster respect for the promotion and protection of all languages, particularly endangered languages, in all individual and collective contexts.” BPI/EPP/2008/PI/60M/23. INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF LANGUAGES 2008 the International Year of Languages (IYL). <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001632/163260e.pdf>. Last accessed: 25 July 2016.

⁴ LISBON EUROPEAN COUNCIL 23 AND 24 MARCH 2000 PRESIDENCY CONCLUSIONS: http://www.ab.gov.tr/files/ardb/evt/1_avrupa_birligi/1_4_zirveler_1985_sonrasi/2000_3_lizbon_zirvesi_baskanlik_sonuc_bildirgesi_en.pdf. Last accessed: 25 July 2016.

⁵ DECISION No 1298/2008/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 16 December 2008 establishing the Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013 action programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:340:0083:0098:EN:PDF>. Last accessed: 25 July 2016.

to achieve one’s goals in life, within one’s socio-cultural context” (Sternberg 2005), resulting from a combination of analytical, practical, and creative skills. In an innovation-based environment it is essential to use information to imagine new ways to solve problems and create new ways of working.

In this changing “learning landscape” (Visser, Visser-Valfrey 2008), a new learning ecology is needed, as the “set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning” (Barron 2006: 195)⁶, which may include formal, informal, and non-formal settings. In this new learning ecology, learning as a multi-directional and multi-modal process, idea exchanges and inquiry all take place within a dynamic system among students, teachers, and a global community. Thus, new roles need to be explored for teacher and learner: a new role for the teacher who besides being no longer the gatekeeper or proprietor of classroom information and knowledge should be willing to act side by side with a learner who far from being passively receiving notions and instructions should be willing to actively co-work with the teacher. In addition, since no one possesses all the skills and knowledge, including knowledge about the technology and content that are needed to function within the new ecology, “a collective intelligence, one that results from individuals and communities working with ideas and information, is leveraged” (O’Reilly 2006).

Active learning in these terms results in significance for students. The new role for learners as active learners allows them to negotiate the inquiry process, benefiting from the unique conditions of the new learning environment while considering ideas, analysing and synthesising information, evaluating and revising learning products, and ultimately sharing, publishing, and acting on new knowledge thus collected. Social networking technologies (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) are helpful as tools for communication, sharing, and just-in-time information within the learning community.

In this new ‘learning landscape’ students are no longer engaged in activities with the aim of simply building up a repertoire of static knowledge and skills to use later nor simply gathering information from an authority figure; rather, they become involved in a large community of learners in which the focus is on authentic and productive inquiry and active meaning-making. Learning becomes a social practice, as it takes into account people’s interests (Jenkins et al. 2006) and, being generated from the learner, becomes “more as a self-directed process with increasingly greater levels of responsibility and commitment” (Dede 2009). Teaching in the new learning environment responds to individual learning needs, with teachers and students co-creating meaning and significance out of a wide range of learning experiences. The role of coach and mentor for the teacher helps develop the learners’ dispo-

⁶ This view is in line with the notion of ecology as “an open system, dynamic and interdependent, diverse, partially self-organizing, and adaptive” (John Seeley Brown 1999).



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sitions, whereas the students have the freedom to choose different strategies and approaches. Through performing the role of active participants in the learning process, they can acquire a new global skill set, one that includes problem-solving, communication, collaboration, planning, and self-evaluation skills. Since they will be working in a global marketplace and living in a globalised society, the students “must be prepared to trade with, work alongside and communicate with persons from radically different backgrounds than their own [...] be trained to understand and confront complex new global threats, from terrorism to a global flu pandemic” (Asia Society 2007)⁷. Therefore, the

⁷ Asia Society is the leading global and pan-Asian organisation that works to strengthen relationships and promote understanding among the people, leaders, and institutions of the

students need to master knowledge and skills so that they can above all cooperate with their international peers.

The new global skill set includes a deeper understanding of academic content as well as a set of strategies that can

United States and Asia. “The Society seeks to increase knowledge and enhance dialogue, encourage creative expression, and generate new ideas across the fields of arts and culture, policy and business, and education. The Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning develops youth to be globally competent citizens, workers, and leaders by equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed for success in an increasingly interconnected world.” <https://asiasociety.org/files/book-globalcompetence.pdf>; http://asiasociety.org/files/GSF_EducatingLeaders.pdf. Last accessed: 25 July 2016.

enable students to learn how to learn; be creative; and control their own learning. This focus helps generate the skills needed in the 21st century as demanded by employers with the ultimate goal to bolster an innovative workforce and stimulate economic development: adaptive expertise; strong communication skills; creativity; interdisciplinary thinking; team-based problem solving.

To act in line with the new paradigms and needs, teachers will have to take on the challenge of acquiring the new global skill set themselves and being co-learners with their students. They must be involved in authentic, challenging professional development experiences themselves. This means that if students must be cooperatively engaged in complex problem-solving tasks with other students internationally, teachers must be engaged in similar experiences to be able to employ more outcome-oriented language and provide workable objectives.

Before the digital age, it was essential to remember information since it was not easily retrievable. Today, the importance of the students' intellectual contributions is primarily in processes of analysis, evaluation, and creation. The highest level of development is now 'create' rather than 'evaluate'. Moreover, they must produce evidence of accomplishing learning goals, which can become part of a learning portfolio that demonstrates their achievement. Above all, the pedagogy of problem-based learning (PBL) provides students with opportunities to learn to think, specifically 'how to think' rather than 'what to think' and potentially within the framework of sustainability. As remarked by Ian Thomas (2009): "To operationalize education associated with sustainability, teaching approaches must focus on elements relating to the processes of learning, rather than the accumulation of knowledge – to develop graduates with capabilities to improvise, adapt, innovate, and be creative". The development of critical thinking is the crucial element in education related to sustainability. Considering language inseparable from culture in any learning environment, it is hard to achieve successful communicative exchanges owing to different ways of conceptualising reality to different language users. Besides, considering the new demands giving birth to the new educational paradigms, we can imagine how challenging it is for educational operators to achieve the objectives included in the EU strategic goal.

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