Chapter 9

Online Language Learning: Understanding and Supporting the Contemporary Digital Multilingual Learner

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses two forces in contemporary societies. The first is that societies today are characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity and increasing human mobility. In this complex setting, language learning has acquired more significance, with the need to communicate worldwide. Secondly, our society is experiencing dramatic technological advancements, one of which pertains to online learning. In this era of ubiquitous learning, where the use of learning management systems, mobile applications, social networks, and other digital technologies can underpin learning, it is necessary to re-address language learning. This overview will categorize the types of online language learning tools and practices that are emerging and prevalent and it will analyze their instructional approaches in the use of the technology. It will also focus on the digital learners that access them having as an ultimate goal to understand the characteristics and needs of the contemporary global, multilingual, and digital learners and how these can be addressed in the learning process.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity and increasing human mobility. People not only travel more easily to other countries, but they work, study, live and relocate to other countries. They consider all places on the planet as an opportunity to advance their lives and/or as adventure.

For example, Europe has a tradition in multilingualism, given the fact that speaking many languages and interacting with various cultures are integral to its foundations. In the European Union we can find 24 official languages and more than 60 indigenous regional or minority languages, which are spoken by around 40 million people (Kużelew ska, 2014). In the meantime, another example that supports the importance of multiculturalism can be found in the United States of America (USA). According to US
Census Bureau (2015), 44.2% of the millennials, people born between 1982 and 2000, are part of a minority race or ethnic group (people that are not non-Hispanic, single-race white). Moreover, the languages other than English (LOTE) spoken at home in the US had increased by 148% between 1980 and 2009 (US Census Bureau, 2011). On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, China is also a case of a country that plays an important role in the field of language learning. According to Wang (2015), almost 400 million Chinese speak English at various proficiency levels. In Mainland China, the government promotes foreign language learning, as part of a broader policy to construct international relations with other countries in political, economic and cultural level (Bolton & Graddol 2012). In 2012, in China there was the largest number of Japanese language learners comparing to the rest of the world and the motivation of Chinese learners of Japanese continues to increase, having as a personal goal the achievement of better cross-cultural understanding (Lv, Gao and Teo, 2017; Gao & Lv, 2018; Teo et al., 2019). Moreover, a lot of students from Mainland China realize their studies in countries such as France, Germany and Spain, thus before moving to these countries, the Chinese students prepare themselves linguistically in their home country by taking lessons of foreign languages (Wang & Xu, 2015). As a consequence, it is obvious that China is another example of a country that reinforces the importance of learning foreign languages, either that language is English or a LOTE (Cheng, 2012; Gao & Zheng, 2019). In this complex setting, with the need to communicate worldwide and across countries, as presented in the above examples, language learning has acquired more significance.

Meanwhile, learners nowadays live in fast paced, constantly changing times and they have developed different needs comparing to the past. Therefore, our society requires lifelong learning and development of new skills as essential personal features that can underpin success (Strimel et al., 2014). In this context, formal learning in a traditional educational institution is not considered the most effective option for learning new ways of engaging with the world of work and sociality. Thus, informal learning and the integration of a variety of approaches to learning has gained a lot of interest and significance (Zapata & Lacorte, 2018).

Learning is not restricted to a specific place, time or age (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Schugurensky, 2000). It happens in our everyday life, at home, at work, while shopping in a market place or visiting a museum, with our family and friends, while using social media or travelling, when meeting new people or living in a foreign country (Melnic & Botez, 2014; Strimel et al., 2014; Raikou & Karalis, 2010) and most of these times we do not even realize that we are actively learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). This kind of learning engages with the world around us, using authentic, every day experiences as its basis. (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

Our society is also characterized by huge and innovative technological advancements, called the Digital Age. These technological advancements provide us with an abundance of information and its easy access, through the Internet and mobile devices (Strimel et al., 2014). In this era, with the greater potential for ubiquitous learning (learning anywhere, anytime), the use of web-based learning management systems, mobile applications and social networks can underpin learning.

As a result of the increasing interest in the domain of digital and online learning, as well as the significance of language learning, an area that is acquiring more and more attention is also online language learning (OLL) (Blake, 2011). There have been some significant steps in the development of innovative platforms and applications for online language learning. However, there is not a lot of research yet on the effectiveness and the learning outcomes of online language learning tools and activities (Tarone, 2015).

Bringing these issues together, this chapter re-addresses the issue of language learning from a technological/ mobile/ online perspective considering in parallel to this the characteristics of the emerging