

Editorial: Language Learning and Teaching. Contemporary Challenges in Language Education

The present issue brings together a collection of empirical studies, a position paper, and a tutorial paper intended to advance the discussion of current challenges in language education. In recent years, the socio-political landscape has undergone significant changes that have consequences for the present and the coming years. The outbreak of the pandemic, a full-scale war in Europe, mass migrations, as well as advancements in communication technologies and the rise of artificial intelligence have affected the functioning of societies worldwide, including the educational sector. Education, which by nature dwells at the junction of the present and the future, attempts to respond to increasing current demands on the one hand and, on the other, to equip younger generations with skills and knowledge that would enable them to cope with the challenges of tomorrow. To do this, a deeper understanding of the dynamism of change is needed, as well as a thorough analysis of the interplay of individual and contextual features in shaping educational reality. Hence, the effort of the present authors to describe and analyse numerous aspects of the domain of language learning and teaching with a view to offering fresh insights and inspiring reflection, exposing problem areas, and opening doors for further discussion.

The issue opens with a position paper “An Ecological Perspective on the Challenges in Language Education: Focus on Agency and Affordances” by Joanna Rokita-Jaśkow who embraces two theories, Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman) and Ecological Theory (van Lier), which have widely been adopted in the field to account for the complexity and dynamism inherent in acquiring an additional language in formal and informal contexts. Her broad treatment of the most current themes encompasses the application of diverse technological tools in language education, the importance of possessing digital skills, and the possibilities technology creates for out-of-school learning. The focus of the contribution is on the teacher, their agency and well-being. Rokita-Jaśkow concludes her article with advice and recommendations for teacher education

and development that put a premium on teacher agency as a tool to overcome obstacles and confront variety and novelty.

Similarly, in the contribution by Dorota Werbińska, “Understanding Language Teachers’ Positional Identities in a Professional Promotion Appraisal Context”, the attention is directed at the teacher. Serving as an examination commission member, Werbińska gained access to data pertaining to ways in which teachers position themselves during professional promotion examinations. This unique opportunity enabled her to offer a comprehensive view of the link between teacher identity, agency, and emotions, showing areas of concern and room for improvement.

The article by Aleksandra Szymańska-Tworek, “EFL Teachers Supporting War Refugee Students from Ukraine in Schools in Poland”, provides an account of the impact of the arrival of Ukrainian students in Polish schools, concentrating on the work of English teachers, who, in addition to performing their primary role, are also expected to act as translators and cultural mediators. Szymańska-Tworek shows how teachers have coped with tasks that considerably exceed their regular duties of providing instruction and managing the classroom. Importantly, the author exposes problem areas and system deficiencies, emphasizing teachers’ own commitment and the effort they make to accommodate refugee students, often without much support.

The focus of the next two contributions shifts towards the learners, as both are empirical papers exploring different routes to learner success. The choice of the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory as the underlying framework to study aspects of instructed second/foreign language acquisition was dictated by the need to capture intricate connections and codependencies among a large number of individual and context-dependent variables. And thus, Katarzyna Rokoszewska in “Group and Individual Learning Profiles of Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency in L2 English Writing at Secondary School” traces developmental trajectories of individuals as compared to groups of learners. As the author argues, group level outcomes fail to accommodate individual variation, which testifies to the uniqueness of the learning experience. Tomasz Róg, in turn, in his “Exploring Task-Based Learning of L2 English Formulaic Sequences from an Intra- and Inter-Individual Perspective”, takes a closer look at effects of task-based language teaching, an instructional approach that emphasizes authenticity and communication. In his comparison of the effectiveness of three types of tasks in acquiring language formulas, Róg discovers various progress and regression patterns, not detectable at the group level, which again proves the singularity of linguistic development. Both Rokoszewska and Róg suggest ways in which this aspect could be tackled in the context of a language classroom.

Another challenging area of language education that the present collection intends to address is Foreign Language Geragogy, a fast-growing domain that originated in response to the increasing number of older adults (over sixty years old)

enrolled in language learning courses. The general well-being and health benefits of learning foreign languages for ageing adults have long been recognized; however, the field remains uncharted territory to a large extent. As many as three contributions in this special issue deal with various aspects of late-life foreign language education. Agata Słowik-Krogulec in “Is It All That Positive? An Exploratory Study of Emotions in the Older Adult In-Person and Online EFL Classrooms” investigates emotions experienced by older adults in the two modes of instruction. The author attempts to diagnose the degree to which the settings meet the criteria of positive language education (Mercer et al.), as well as to identify what positive and negative emotions are generated and how the former can be promoted and the latter hindered. “Older Adult Learners’ Willingness to Communicate in English during Task Performance” by Anna Borkowska is an account of a study of older adult learners’ readiness to initiate and sustain communication while performing information-gap activities. The author emphasizes the role of the social dimension of classroom interaction in enhancing learners’ willingness to use the target language despite low proficiency and enumerates conditions that facilitate communication. She also describes a range of communication strategies most frequently applied by learners in this age group. Finally, Ebru Noyan’s paper “Older Adult EFL Learners’ Readiness for Autonomous Language Learning” revolves around the topic of learner autonomy. The researcher investigates the readiness of Turkish learners for autonomy in learning English in later life and traces the sources of their extensive dependence on teachers, acknowledging the impact of culture and previous learning experience.

The issue closes with the methods tutorial paper by Joanna Pitura, who offers practical guidance on the application of software to develop analytic skills of students at the tertiary level. Her “Teaching Quantitative Data Analysis with GNU PSPP: A Cognitive Apprenticeship Approach” presents a detailed account of the implementation of a methods course, its evaluation, as well as an extended discussion of the theoretical background on which it was based. The Cognitive Apprenticeship Model (Collins et al.), which rests on modelling and coaching, allows students to acquire essential knowledge that can easily be put to practice. According to Pitura, this approach prepares students to embark on their own research projects. Moreover, she highlights the use of open-source software as a means of fostering research independence among students and researchers, as well.

The nine papers brought together in this issue, although covering a wide range of topics, present only a fraction of the wealth of themes that engage researchers in the domain of language learning and teaching. It is my deepest hope that the concepts, processes, and phenomena presented here will inspire further discussion and set novel directions for research.

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