



## Managing Infinity – Language Teaching in the Post-Digital Age

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### Abstract

*As language teachers we are deeply aware of the effects of technological developments on society, and on our teaching context. This paper aims to show how post-digital awareness (meaning understanding the social effects of digital technology) should be used to help teachers navigate the complex choices we face, every time we enter a classroom or search for new resources or techniques. The language teachers' task today is to deal with rapid technological development, but also drastic social change and transformations in communicative behaviour. The immediate challenge for teachers is identified as 'the infinite choice problem': the plethora of materials, websites, apps and the sheer availability of text is stressful for teachers and confusing for learners. Feelings of disempowerment or increasing disengagement risk diminishing the importance of language learning. Accompanying this is an ever-increasing pressure to 'do a good job'. This is exacerbated by significant changes in language itself: interactions are more complex than envisaged by traditional linguistics (the spoken-written dichotomy is inadequate to explain language use, and grammar rules founded upon the 'centre' are questioned); the uses of language may be changing; transactional language skills are becoming less important than the ability to present oneself – to express (or create) identity. The paper then attempts to offer solutions to these dilemmas. Firstly, AI is considered, and through reference to research data and current thinking, it is proposed that we educators should accept artificial intelligence and use it to the advantage of our classes. Data collected suggest we will have to alter traditional means of assessment, but do not indicate that 'all is lost'. The huge amount of learning material available leads us to understand the importance of authenticity in every teaching context: the selection of text (in its broadest sense) for learning must be based on local meanings. Teacher training should take complexity into account and help future teachers select and benefit from the richness of textual opportunity on offer. Lastly, language education presents as the ideal forum for discussion of human values in the age of fake news and Tik-Tok superficiality: it develops skills of analysis, and evaluation of meaning and so encourages discernment.*

**Keywords:** *Infinity, teaching strategies, materials, AI, discernment*

### 1. Introduction

The direct and indirect effects of technological developments on society, and so on our teaching context, are impossible to ignore. Besides feelings of *technological determinism* [1] and the understandable fear of change that might assail the teacher, we can note the dematerialisation of our life spaces (in advanced economies we consume less physical material today than twenty years ago, but consume more digitally), the sheer range of sources of information, entertainment and communication instantly available to us as individuals, and the increased complexity of linguistic channels in use. These new arenas of linguistic interaction must be of the utmost concern to language teachers, both for their primary and secondary effects: information technology exposes our students to cybercrime, hacking, bullying and the like, but also to serious social effects (social disinhibition, injustice, political misinformation and mental health issues) which governments have shown themselves unable to mitigate effectively [2].

At the same time, the linguistic context has also been transformed. Leaving aside the effects of digital communication, it worth pausing to think of the means to publication open today, the different sources of 'facts' and the sudden arrival of AI. It is quite possible that within a few years the vast majority of websites will be generated by AI and not by human authorship. This implies different language skills necessary for our students and, indeed, different sources of language change.

### 2. Post-digital awareness

As language teachers we have little choice but to embrace a post-digital mindset, understanding and using technology, but with informed choices and social awareness. It is not enough simply to employ



an app or a device in a language class because it offers a new affordance, or just helps us to look up to date. Instead, we should always avoid unprincipled implementation by having a clear, and clearly expressed, rationale for our tech choices. This will help us to avoid the danger of unfulfilled promise that often bedevils first use of technological applications in language learning contexts, but will also lay emphasis on the pragmatic elements in each type of interaction. If a student creates an Instagram story, for example, they need to understand the interplay of picture and text, and to exploit the transience of the medium.

### **2.1 Choice**

A fundamental characteristic of the post-digital is an understanding of choice and how to deal with it effectively. As teachers of language we are spoilt for choice in the current environment: we have endless resources online (often available free of charge), including support exercises, helpful videos explaining every conceivable aspect of the language, huge textual resources, and easy access to TV shows and auditory entertainment (music, podcasts etc.). In many ways our situation is the complete reverse of thirty or forty years ago, when our students were hungry for any possible contact with the language and so would go to the once-a-month showing of a film in the original language, or ask their teacher to kindly transcribe the lyrics to their favourite song (a two-hour task usually!). But the context has recently changed yet again: now AI can create an infinite range of text items almost instantaneously on any topic. In all fields infinite choice is a real question, but nowhere more so than in language teaching. When we reflect on the fact that we rarely use more than around 70% of the material supplied in the typical coursebook package (in class or as homework), then we can understand how significant the issue of quantity and selection is. In my own experience using a B2 coursebook, the wealth of support material is attractive and impressive [3], but much perhaps remains unused or under-exploited, not to speak of the immense material 'out there' online that we rarely come to see or use.

### **2.2 The language teacher's task**

Obviously, the most pressing task for us is to navigate these choices, find the best opportunities and train our learners in the skills of discernment and selection that will help them throughout their lives. But this is not all. Our decisions as to the use of apps and resources need to be made based, not only on the efficacy of the aids chosen, but also by taking into account the social changes we are experiencing. The modes of communication on offer don't just tell our students something about grammar or vocabulary: they imply social norms and potentially push certain kinds of pragmatic behaviour. And so our recommendations should reflect our awareness of these more subtle aspects of materials and devices used. There are significant transformations in communicative behaviour currently occurring and our choices should recognise this.

### **2.3 Language has changed**

The advent of the internet, social media and personal handheld devices has rendered our traditional approaches to the analysis of language largely inadequate. The simple spoken/written dichotomy (philosophically questioned by Derrida [4]) is hardly valid when we try to describe and assess many communicative moments today. Is a podcast only *written-to-be-spoken*? Is a Facebook post simply written (even though the interplay with photos etc. is probably fundamental)? Are emails and WhatsApp messages closer to spoken rather than written language? With AI the question becomes more pressing and not merely a philosophical nicety: texts are produced instantly (in contrast to the traditional conception of the 'act of writing') and will now be produced in auditory form, should the user so wish. At the same time, our traditional descriptions (or prescriptions) of grammar are under examination: should the centre provide norms for the periphery [5]? Does a lingua franca have a completely different view of how language should be constructed and used [6]?

This implies very different skills on the part of our new language speakers. The future abilities of successful language users might be much less transactional (*i.e.* can I buy, sell or refuse this in the language?) and more concerned with one of the fundamental skills of post-digital society: presenting and performing one's identity.

### **2.4 AI the game-changer**

2023 will perhaps be remembered as the year that AI truly arrived. Articles are published almost every day on the topic and its implications (see, for example, *The Observer* in the UK, which published numerous articles on the arrival of AI in September 2023), but it is perhaps interesting to note that we



have been using AI for more than a decade now (on our phones, with our emails). But this year AI has suddenly become unavoidable: we know that texts can be produced instantly and with a high degree of accuracy [7], pictures can be generated with ever-increasing precision and credible dialogues can be maintained for hours. The potential dilatory effects on education are obvious (students doing their assignments through chatbots, copying in examinations etc.), and recent research suggests that in the United States cheating has jumped from 10<sup>th</sup> place to 1<sup>st</sup> in an index of concerns in education. At the same time, most translation between common language pairs can be done with remarkable accuracy [8]. All these developments clearly pose a challenge to traditional language teaching.

### **Conclusion: some suggested solutions**

Fear is a reasonable reaction to this transformed language environment, but there are many opportunities for language education. Firstly, AI need in no way be our enemy, but perhaps the tasks we require of our classes should change. It is true that a writing assignment can easily be done in moments with AI, but the skill we should promote is the critical analysis of the texts generated, in particular as regards higher-level discourse aspects and pragmatics. We can use AI to generate ten different answers to our model B2-level question and work with our class on evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each. In the same way in a CLIL class we can generate texts in English on the subject at hand, and then fact check them (notoriously the chatbot produced text will be superficially convincing but contain significant inaccuracies).

All texts used in class, from whatever source, should be authentic in having a local meaning and value. They can come from anywhere (potentially), but it is hoped that students will acquire an ability to recognise sources that are more reliable. Teacher training will have to change in order to prepare teachers to navigate the range of resources available and benefit from the text-rich society we live in. There is already literature available to assist teacher development in this sphere [9].

Most of all, as language educators we have a special responsibility to work on the skills of communication, and one of these is spotting fake news and untrustworthy agents. Rather than productive and transactional language, we will be developing discernment in our learners – granting them the ability to identify, select and use truly communicative language.

### **References**

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- [8] DeepL (DeepL.com/it/translator) is a very effective and free-to-use application for machine translation. Productive work comparing translations can be done on this.
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