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## What's (in) a digital classroom? Levels of digitalization in FL learning and teaching

### The digitalization of school education: a pedagogical approach (*'digitale Bildung'*)

Before developing a perspective on the digitalization of language learning and proposals of one's own, it is advisable and necessary to start with the study of and reflections on the concepts and terminologies that are available and pertinent in the context of teaching and learning in the digital age. 'Digitalization' is itself a concept which foregrounds certain aspects of the phenomena in question, namely the transformation of formerly analogue, physical signs into discrete digital signals and electronic bits whenever content is presented, represented, communicated or 'shared' – one of the standard practices of digital communication.

All of the pre-dominant pedagogical concepts or frameworks that are available in the field to date, like Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Technology Enhanced Language Learning or Media Competence (a German concept, *'Medienkompetenz'*) share a number of features:

- Their focus is on the technology or on the hardware (technological infrastructure, computers, WiFi etc.)

- Content, meaning and communication are separated or regarded as being separable from the instruments (or 'media') of the transmission of information; the hardware is regarded as instrumental.
- These concepts emerged as a general pedagogical, cross-curricular framework, irrespective of disciplinary or subject-specific purposes.
- All of them regard the value of technology or media as complementary to using a language or as external to the learning process ('assisted', 'enhanced').

Since in the domain of teaching and learning languages, communicating content between interlocutors in given situations and interactions is the core of language use and of all language learning, what then do we do with digital types and forms of communication that are inherent to the utterance itself because it takes on a digital form?

As opposed to technology-oriented concepts, the multiliteracies approach (The New London Group 2000) develops a pedagogical framework which analyses recent and ongoing social and cultural changes in the domains of private lives, the world of work and public life partly, but not only caused by the spread of digital communication, production and design (also cf. BMBF 2016: 6). Digitalization can thus be regarded as a cause of, but also as a result of, complex global economic, cultural and personal exchange processes, including migration. All of these processes have seen (and are still undergoing) fundamental changes which can briefly be summarized as global-

ization, the multiplication and individualization of cultural, ethical or religious orientations, the multiplication of textual information and presentation (hypertextualization), the pluralization and the acceleration of the distribution of information, and the use of a large variety of modes in acts of representation and communication, with visual, diagrammatic or cartographic languages among them. Digital education (*'digitale Bildung'*) must therefore be conceived as part of a larger pedagogical framework that draws upon social, cultural and societal changes, processes, and conditions in which the younger generation live and which they must be able to actively design and create (*'designing social futures'*; also cf. BMBF 2016: 6).

## Levels of digitalization

In light of the previous remarks, it seems advisable to define as clearly as possible the aspects or phenomena that we mean to address whenever we talk about 'digitalization'; and these are, of course, not limited to the classroom itself (in terms of 'assisting or 'enhancing' learning), but first and foremost digitalization concerns fundamental cultural and communicative practices that must be integrated into language learning, and the English language in particular as a global language and as *the* language of worldwide communication via the Internet (in which many learners already participate actively in their everyday lives, e.g. youtubing, gaming etc.).

For pedagogical discourses on digitalization, I propose to distinguish between the following six levels:

### (1) The digitalization of information, representation and communication in the lifeworld

Digitalization in the lifeworld concerns all domains of social interaction and communication, all the more since digitalization is now almost universally complemented by mobile communication devices (like the smartphone or the spread of Internet communication facilities). The digitalization of cultural communication and social interaction encompasses:

- the development of *communicative practices* in (and their further extension into) digital environments like online chats, e-mailing, tweeting, or blogging;
- new ways of *presenting and positioning the self* in ongoing discourses and of
- producing and *constituting social constellations and sociality* (e.g. online friendship);
- the use of *digital designs of presentation and representation* in private and professional contexts, characterized by the co-presence of various media and semiotic modes (images, verbal language, sound etc.), as in electronic slides, websites or digital photography;
- the *collaborative online production of texts and artefacts* on electronic platforms, forums or wikis;
- the dynamic emergence and use of *digital genres* in communication and information, like the blog entry, the vlog (or: video blog), the explainer

- video, formal or informal e-mail letters, online chats, instant messaging;
- online *search for information* and retrieval of digitalized knowledge;
- the *use of digital genres* (artefacts) of communication and representation as building blocks of discourses.

One of the most fundamental cultural and social changes caused by digitalization and mobile digital devices concerns the basics of our concept of 'communication', which is traditionally defined as exchanging signals between a sender and a receiver in a given, bounded context (or situation). However, digital communication, and its mobile version in particular, has led to a constant 'bipolarity' of communication, the permanent 'presence' of interlocutors in at least two worlds, one of them the physical empirical environment and the other one in one or several distant contexts. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman puts it:

Our life (and to a growing degree as we move from older to younger generations) is split between two universes, 'online' and 'offline', and irreparably bicentred. With our lives spanning two universes, each with substantive content and procedural rules of its own, we tend to deploy the same linguistic material when we move to and fro, without noticing the change of its semantic field at each crossing of the boundary. [...] Virtually every notion related to present-day life processes inevitably bears a mark of their bipolarity. (Bauman in Bauman & Lyon 2013: 37)

The impact of this shift to a 'dual' communicative life in two worlds, with a digital second life permanently entangled in our empirical world, and our first life entangled in

the second, is so fundamental that we (linguistics in particular) may have to re-conceptualize our standard communication models that are based on 'simple' sender-receiver-constellations in a single situation or context. Instead, we may have to imagine communication as always bi- or multi-directional, with a constant co-presence of at least two or even more contexts in which we simultaneously communicate. In the digital age, this is a communicative, interactional and also cultural challenge for which strategies must be taught and learned in language classrooms.

## **(2) From the 'old' four skills to multiple literacies**

The literacies concept points to the fact that an individual's capacity to 'pursue their happiness' and to participate in social negotiations depends largely on the ability to make meaning of signs, to acquire and share knowledge, to articulate thoughts, emotions and experiences, and to engage in all sorts of communicative interaction (being 'literate'), not least in FL communication. This is why in the English classroom, generally speaking, digital education (*Bildung*) must account for the digital dimension of discourses in the foreign language (FL) and the individual's cultural, political and social participation in life-world discourses. School education therefore needs to equip the students with digital competencies and literacies (cf. Walker & White 2013: 8-9). For the English classroom this must be specified as digital discourse competence in the foreign language

which encompasses proficiency in a wide range of digital communicative genres across sign systems and languages (with a main focus on verbal language; cf. Hallet 2014, 2016), their combination in a single act of communication (multimodality, as in electronic slides or videos), and the ability to reflect critically upon their own and others' digital practices and ways of self-constitution, social interaction and sociality. Concepts of teaching communication must therefore be expanded beyond the 'old' notions of speaking and writing and towards the use of manifold digital communicative and representational formats and genres, including 'new' digitalized genres of oral communication like the explainer video or the podcast.

### **(3) The digitalization of classroom technologies**

Teaching digitalized communication is, of course, only possible if the classroom is digitalized, too. This digitalization needs to materialize in the technological equipment and the communicative or informational practices that these technologies entail. The technologies and devices (tools) which are or should or will be available in school classrooms (also cf. BMBF 2016: 20-22), and in communicative language learning classrooms in particular, encompass

- Internet access in classrooms;
- electronic interactive whiteboards (IAB);
- personal computers or tablets, hand-held devices, smartphones;
- electronic teaching and learning platforms (electronic platforms, virtual classrooms);

- electronic and mobile language learning devices (e.g. mobile electronic dictionaries);
- digital course books and materials.

These technologies are not directly tied to, or intrinsic to, language learning and use, not least because they occur in content subjects and other classrooms, too. This is why they can be conceptualized as 'assisting' or 'enhancing' learning across the curriculum.

### **(4) The digitalization of language learning**

The aforementioned digital technologies are, of course, a pre-condition for any software and digital application that has been developed and designed for the purpose of digital language learning. There are three major areas that need to be considered in this field:

- digital language learning materials and software designed for classroom use, normally at the teacher's disposal, e.g. digital coursebooks, interactive whiteboard software, personal computer classroom software (e.g. grammar training programmes), pedagogical tablet applications or webquest software;
- language learning software, often commercial, designed for individual and independent learning, mostly online and with feedback or tracking options in terms of individualized levels and progress reports, language learning games;
- digital environments designed for non-pedagogical purposes and use in the medial lifeworld, such as video platforms, social network platforms, blogs or forums all of which can be connected to the language classroom, adding to it a very authentic, real-

world dimension on the one hand, and offering the option of connecting the classroom to the lifeworld, and vice versa. Above all, multiplayer online gaming is one of the most popular domains in which young people engage and in which being part of the global gamer community goes directly hand in hand with using English as a global language.

It is this dimension of the digitalization of the language classroom that comes full circle, referring us back to what was said in section (1) about the digitalization of cultural and social life and communication. In terms of education and experiential learning, this is the most promising path of digitalized language learning since students will be familiar with, if not at home in this world, and eager to learn more and more systematically. They will thus engage in ways of doing things and in communicative and social practices in ways that are almost natural to them.

#### **(5) The digitalization of classroom communication and discourse**

As much as digitalization changes communication in all spheres of life, it also affects the domain of education in schools and universities (the fourth domain of change, apart from personal, public and work life, that multiliteracies pedagogy does not, or only implicitly, address). It becomes manifest mainly in the steadily growing use of electronic learning and working tools as listed in the third level which have changed the way in which knowledge and experiences are accessed, retrieved, represented, circulated, shared and acquired in

teaching and learning contexts. These changes go hand in hand with the digitalization of classroom discourse and teaching as well as with learning. They have made it and still make it necessary to re-define the classroom and classroom discourses, since the latter are no longer necessarily tied to the physical presence of the learners in a physical room, and classroom communication is not necessarily synchronous any more. As a result, new forms of distance or blended learning have emerged, and new concepts like the virtual, the flipped or inverted classroom are currently being designed and developed that try to make productive use of the 'bipolarity' of classroom discourse.

These classroom technologies lead to or offer a wide range of other forms of access to knowledge and classroom communication:

- individual, mobile and almost universal access to information and knowledge (e.g. instant online verification or falsification of facts inside the physical classroom – the bipolarity of classroom discourse!);
- the collaborative online and offline creation and production of digital communicative artefacts;
- the multimodality of presenting and communicating knowledge and results of classroom work (electronic slides, digital explainer videos etc.);
- asynchronous and distance communication, including teacher instructions and tasks or feedback.

These new types of classroom discourse will develop rapidly since electronic formats (genres) of communication and classroom discourse, due to the extreme dy-

namics of the creation (and also commercial promotion) of new technologies and devices, will constantly change and be transformed along with new hardware and communication technologies.

### **(6) Reflections and discourses on digitalization**

In a pedagogical approach to digitalization it is crucial to enable learners and teachers alike to reflect upon and research the permanent cultural and pedagogical challenges of digitalization, both in the students' and teachers' lifeworld and in FL cultures and societies. The FL classroom is an important space for negotiations and discussions and a training ground for the individuals' need and ability to position themselves in often controversial discourses on cultural and pedagogical digitalization.

Also, there is a language of digitalization and also a technical and critical vocabulary in which people who want to participate in these discourses must be proficient. The language classroom is the pedagogical space in which teachers and students can learn to engage in critical reflections and discussions on digitalization.

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