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# Position paper on the development of digital language teaching

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## Position paper on the development of digital language teaching

The ubiquitous presence of the digital world has become indispensable in both private and public life. In today's world, the increased use of digital media and digital tools represents a sometimes invisible, yet indispensable accompaniment to our communication with others. This development is reflected with increasing tendency not only in communication, but also in foreign language learning. In the last two years, the integration of digital tools into language teaching has led to a further evolution of media literacy and brought about many changes for teachers and learners. Due to the acute need for quick solutions during this time, existing tools were often implemented without prior consideration of their pros and cons, as there was a clear lack of time to reflect on these new developments and associated changes. For future digital language teaching, it is necessary to understand these tools and design their use in a responsible and meaningful way (see Fredholm 2019; Ducar & Schocket 2018). As teachers and learners, we need to be aware of their use and reflectively make conscious decisions about learning and teaching paths. We also need to reflect and consider how digital and analog language learning can complement one other.

The main goal of our work at the Centre for Digital Language Learning at the Language Resource Centre (ZediS) is to explicitly promote an open dialogue towards dealing with the issues of digitization, media didactics and the sustainable use of digital tools in language learning and teaching. In doing so, it is important to us to evaluate digital tools critically, yet constructively, and to make the accompanying recommendations for handling them more transparently.

### Digital language learning at the university

- Through digital media or asynchronous teaching, we can give learners more individuality in terms of learning location, learning time, learning pace, choice of learning content and learning objectives. This particularly benefits heterogeneous learning groups so that learners can engage with language learning according to their needs (cf. Würffel 2019: 123; Boeckmann 2020: 11).
- A moderate use of digital tools (e.g., language learning programs, apps, translation programs, etc.) can enrich instruction, while the use of too many digital components can lead to oversaturation among learners. Quality must be prioritized over quantity here.
- In addition to its actual purpose, digital language learning usually also leads to the promotion of learners' media competence.
- Online independent study can be used by learners to supplement instruction in the (digital) classroom or to learn a language on their own. When used outside the language classroom, there

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is (usually) no opportunity for exchange between learners, and motivating stimuli from teachers are not available (cf. Boeckmann et al. 2020: 11).

- Many language learning software programs are geared towards general language learning and do not specifically address the scientific and technical language environment of university students.

### **Digital language teaching at the university**

- For instructors, digital teaching means a change in their teaching practice, because in addition to their subject and didactic expertise, they must also incorporate digitally interactive elements into the classroom and have a sound knowledge of digital media to do so (cf. Murphy 2015: 54-56). In addition, online teaching entails a "high communicative-interactive complexity" (Boeckmann et al. 2020: 10) because teachers must monitor several communication channels (chat, video transmission, hand signals) while considering media-didactic aspects. For this reason, it is necessary to deal with the topic continuously and critically, to exchange ideas and to further educate oneself to maintain the acquired knowledge (cf. Bridle 2019: 12).
- It is necessary that teachers develop a routine in dealing with digital tools, because only with a developed routine can they keep better track of the communication possibilities and focus more specifically on the learners instead of the technology in the classroom (cf. Boeckmann et al. 2020: 42-43). To develop this routine, trial and error practice can be used in the form of collaborative work between teachers. In this way, teachers do not work together to use the tools, but also exchange ideas and can develop new creative solutions (cf. Fleischhauer et al. 2021: 40).
- Meaningful language teaching in the digital space depends not only on the media-didactic skills of the teacher, but also on the technical equipment of the learners. The use of a webcam and a functioning headset, together with a stable Internet connection, are among the prerequisites that must be met to enable a pleasant working environment and well-functioning communication (cf. Fleischhauer et al. 2021: 36; Boeckmann et al. 2020: 42).

### **Media didactics in university language teaching**

- Media didactics does not merely entail transferring analog documents one-to-one to digital tools, but rethinking digital teaching with regard to language learning, teaching and testing, e.g., in the form of teaching-learning concepts such as inverted classroom and blended learning or digital projects and through the use of interactive videos or open-book exams (cf. Schmidt 2020: 254; Gruber 2020: 197). The use of digital tools should bring added value to both learning and teaching.

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- In this context, digital tools may only be seen as added value if complementary "possibilities are exploited through them, i.e., teaching sequences take place that could not have been implemented with conventional media and offer advantages for the learning process or more comprehensive communication possibilities for the learners" (Boeckmann et al. 2020: 15).
  - One advantage of digital language teaching or the inclusion of digital tools in face-to-face teaching is the possibility of accessing existing teaching materials, such as videos, images, news texts, etc. according to demand. These may not have been prepared (or altered) for pedagogical purposes, thus enabling action-oriented, realistic, and pragmatic teaching and learning in a simple and authentic way. This form of engagement can lead learners to use the alternative digital learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

### **Challenges in the digitization of language teaching**

- Even though we have more and more technological capabilities, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) cannot replace language teachers in the near future, because an AI cannot provide a sense of cultural insight, nor is it possible to form a personal bond with the AI (cf. Kwok 2015: 159-160).
- When learners use AI-driven tools such as Google Translate and DeepL to translate texts into other languages, various, yet clearly important, errors often occur. While orthographic and morphosyntactic errors occur less frequently, errors are particularly present in the area of idioms and lexis, as AI cannot introduce cultural specifics and contextuality accordingly (cf. Roche 2019: n.d.).
- Although AI can recognize whether a task has been solved correctly or incorrectly based on results, it is often unable to provide spontaneous explanations and specifically address the individual needs of learners (cf. Kwok 2015: 158). In addition, not all errors are detected with the help of AI. Furthermore, there are not enough technical language examples in the corpora available online, so that subject-specific feedback is often not feasible.
- In many online independent study options, learning is determined by algorithms and not according to current learner needs. Only the topics that are known to the program can be processed, which leads to the fact that the target group may not be supported accordingly (cf. Kwok 2015: 160). It is therefore necessary to critically examine the content and implementation before using such tools.
- Many online independent study programs are mostly static in nature at the current level, which leads to the fact that they only know predetermined results when correcting tasks and do not accept alternative solutions.

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- It should be noted that within the EU that apps, language learning software or other digital tools often do not comply with EU requirements regarding their GDPR compliance.

### **Sustainable use of media**

- The acquisition of new media brings with it a wide range of possibilities for interactive teaching, but the purchase of new hardware and software should be considered carefully and should only be made when there is a conceptual need or concrete conceptual goals. Due to resource scarcity and "socio-ecological effects of production, use and disposal of media technologies" (Kannengießer 2022: 79), newly acquired media should be used intensively to ensure sustainability.
- It is not enough to acquire new hardware and software: teachers and learners must understand and test these in terms of technical use and comprehensible language-didactic application possibilities so that targeted long-term use can take place.
- Digital tools should be used thoughtfully with regard to their required energy consumption (and the associated use of resources) because the use of an app is not always necessary - classic analog methods in face-to-face teaching are often more useful.

### **Conclusion and outlook**

The use of digital tools has become an indispensable part of language teaching, as it gives learners great flexibility in their learning. Digital tools bring specific added value in many areas, but targeted use is necessary, in which the added value compared to the analog variant must be clear.

Digital tools for language learning are widely used, and there is still a need for research in many areas of digital language teaching (especially at universities) to determine how, where, why, and when digital tools can improve language teaching and learning over purely analog learning. Among other things, it would still be necessary to investigate under which conditions learners, in this case students and thus digital natives, prefer face-to-face language instruction or rather online. In addition, it is important to find out why learners use digital tools and for what reason they choose certain tools (cf. Jolley & Maimone 2022: 30). Initial studies have not yet produced any clear results on the factors influencing this. Little information is also available so far on affective and cognitive factors in language learning and the influence of translation tools on language learning (cf. Jolley & Maimone 2022: 31). Specifically, this means that there are still many gaps in the research field that need to be filled in the years to come.

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