

# COVID-19 underlines the importance of learning languages via emerging technologies

There has long been a view that learning an additional language is less necessary in the digital age, given the advent of emerging technologies such as Google Translate and others, which in basic ways minimise language barriers for cross-cultural communication.

However, the high usage of emerging language learning technologies that provide flexible online platforms for diverse users to learn languages (such as Duolingo) is evidence of a significant demand for continued language learning, particularly during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Duolingo claims in a 2020 report that from 11 March to 30 April 2020, 30 million new users registered to study a language on Duolingo. Busuu, also amongst the top apps for language learning, claims it has tripled revenue in China and Italy during the pandemic. From a business perspective, the pandemic has resulted in an increase of online/mobile-based language learning, which presumably will continue as pandemic-related restrictions remain. Learners seem to remain motivated and interested in other cultures and potential travel in the future; and many have used time during stay-at-home orders to improve their language skills.

Two patterns are clear:

- Learning additional languages in a traditional face-to-face setting is very difficult in a pandemic due to limited international travel and other restrictions on movement; and
- Learning additional languages can be more accessible and attractive with the aid of emerging technologies, particularly on mobile devices.

It should be noted that language learning in secondary schools continues to decline in countries such as Australia and New Zealand due to multiple factors, including concern about the way languages are scaled in final year academic scores (In Australia this is known as Australian Tertiary Admission Rank). Further, tertiary level budget cuts to language programs, particularly Asian languages and studies, have perhaps demonstrated a continuing monolingual mindset in Australia.

Despite these difficulties, the intersection of technology, language, and culture can facilitate a plurilingual education which is so essential, especially in a pandemic.

## **The importance of language literacy, particularly in pandemic times**

*... 'Since working in [a quarantine facility], my reason [for learning Chinese as a second language] has changed a bit. We have had hundreds of guests come through the facility who could only speak Mandarin. The language barrier makes it difficult to pass on information or help the guest, even for something as simple as ordering a bottle [of] water. This makes an already stressful situation even worse for people returning home from China. It makes me feel bad that I can't help these people and make their stay in isolation easier. I still want to enjoy the challenge of learning new things, but I also want to be able to help people from different cultures who may not speak English.'* Language student at a New Zealand University.

This student's reasoning for investing in learning an additional language is deeply constructive because it recognises the importance of communicating critical information with culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and communities.

Their account reflects the construct of 'investment' by linguistics and language scholars Ron Darvin and Bonny Norton. Norton's work highlights the understanding of a learner's desire to engage in social interaction and community practices, which is complex and involves multiple identities and changes across time and space. As well-respected scholar Claire Kramsch states, 'Norton's notion of *investment*, a strong dynamic term with economic connotations... accentuates the role of human agency and identity...a synonymous with "language learning commitment" and is based on a learner's intentional choice and desire'.

The student in New Zealand quoted above is among many other frontline workers and medical specialists who are still experiencing enormous challenges communicating with those who are not proficient in the dominant language as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. Notably, Professor Ingrid Piller and her colleagues in China argue that the COVID-19 crisis is a mass multilingual communication challenge due to multi-layered factors, including 'the dominance of English-centric global mass communication', 'the longstanding devaluation of minoritised languages' and 'the failure to consider the importance of multilingual repertoires for building trust and resilient communities by governments'.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs policy brief ‘Do you speak COVID-19?’ also addresses the public health importance of language for marginalised people who do not necessarily speak the dominant language, have no or low literacy, or who cannot access different forms of basic pandemic-related information. The UN’s Global Humanitarian Response Plan identifies risk communication with critical public health information and community engagement as priorities. Since then, many governments have responded, at least in part. For example, the New Zealand Government has translated crucial COVID-19 information into 25 languages other than English. Whether this is of good enough quality and delivered through the most effective channels remains unclear.

It is evident that learning languages is a crucial facet of social equity and justice in pandemic times. In the UK, a coalition of educational bodies has lobbied the government to promote language learning as ‘essential to the economic and social strength of the UK as it emerges from COVID-19’. This view is not new; in 2013, the EU language and culture Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou stated that learning foreign languages was a way for Europeans to exit economic doldrums and find employment opportunities across borders.

## **Technology at the service of language teachers and learners**

New technologies have enormous potential to support and enhance language learning across different age groups. The rise of technologies used in all subject areas has changed education dramatically, by enabling teaching and learning on digital platforms, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respected linguist Robert Godwin-Jones argues that the ‘Apple-inspired touchscreen smartphone is not just another technological innovation, but rather a device that has ushered in a new era in the human-machine relationship and that, thereby, it has the potential (not yet realised) of fundamentally disrupting teaching and learning, including L1 and L2 literacies and learning’.

Since the early 2000s, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has assisted young children undertaking language learning by using robots (Robot-Assisted Language Learning (RALL)) to partially solve the problem of finding qualified and experienced native-speaking teachers.

Platforms such as Education Perfect, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom are used widely by teachers to design and create multimodal content and activities and engage with language learners online.

Research shows these technologies and platforms are promising but can be challenging for teachers to include in their teaching practices. Language teachers are increasingly required to take on new roles as facilitators of learning as well as designers of the curriculum. Facilitating student-centred learning has been relatively widely understood and accepted by teachers, but most language teachers do not see themselves as curriculum designers even though they undertake task design for language classes on a day-to-day basis.

Further, new technologies and platforms cannot totally replace human effort in language learning because only humans can convey complex understandings relating to beliefs and cultural practices, locally and globally, in evolving circumstances.

However, language educators need to seriously take new technologies into account and be mindful of how they can be used to address the diverse needs and environments of language learners. An inquiry-based intercultural virtual exchange, starting with questions, problems and scenarios through videoconferencing or asynchronous interaction, enables students to communicate with peers in the target language-speaking cultures and communities on issues such as family and relationships, intergenerational understanding, language maintenance and revitalisation, politics and international relations. Such interaction aims to focus on critical thinking and intercultural communication, which can be achieved in school, university or community school settings. Ideally, language learners would co-construct the curriculum with language teachers-as-designers – a process which involves exploring and reflecting students' own and encountered culture and identity along with target language culture and contexts.

This draws on the theory and practice of intercultural language teaching, task based language teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy/teaching, and technology enhanced language learning (computer assisted language learning). For example, language teachers-as-designers could work with Information and Communication Technology specialists to develop digital games on mobile devices. GooseChase is one of the very easy-to-access and free platforms, which provides teachers and learners with sample games or templates to create games. The 'scavenger hunt' is an exemplar educational game created for enhancing student engagement in

learning Chinese and other related cultural and historical knowledge. Of course, newly and co-constructed curricula would require proper evaluation through learner feedback and teacher reflection.

Governments, professional associations, teacher educators and researchers need to carefully consider the professional knowledge required for effective language teaching afforded by the emerging technologies. Provision of continuing professional development in hybrid online/in-person formats is much needed to equip teachers in diverse education sectors with enriched knowledge, resources and pedagogical solutions for post-pandemic recovery.

*Image credit: tirachardz/Freepik*