

Introduction

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The landscape of Higher Education (HE) has always been dynamic, but the past few years have seen an acceleration of change that few could have predicted. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a profound change in educational methods, forcing institutions globally to swiftly move from traditional face-to-face teaching to online and hybrid formats. This unprecedented shift not only highlighted the resilience and adaptability of educators but also exposed significant challenges and opportunities in language teaching.

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“Innovative Language Teaching Practices in Higher Education in a Post-COVID Era” is a timely and essential exploration of how language educators have navigated these transformative times. The contributors to this volume delve into the profound impacts of the pandemic, technological advancements, and socio-economic changes on language teaching. Through empirical research, case studies and practical suggestions they provide insights into how innovative practices are shaping the future of language education.

As we emerge from the pandemic, the question of how to effectively blend pre- and post-COVID teaching practices becomes increasingly pertinent. The research presented in this book examines the integration of traditional pedagogical methods with current digital tools and new educational paradigms. This synthesis is crucial not only for addressing the learning gaps created during the pandemic but also for preparing learners for the demands of a rapidly evolving world.

The importance of HE in this era cannot be overstated. Language instructors, in particular, are tasked with not only teaching linguistic skills but also preparing students to navigate and contribute to a complex and interconnected world. The innovative practices highlighted in this book offer valuable strategies for achieving these goals, starting with a chapter on language teacher education. In her chapter, “Rethinking CALL Teacher Education after COVID-19: a Digital Literacies Approach”, Cintia Regina Lacerda Rabello explores the critical role of digital technologies in language teacher education (CTE) in Brazil, particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic’s Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). It highlights the significant challenges faced by educators unprepared for integrating Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) due

to inadequate infrastructure and digital literacies. Studies from a Rio de Janeiro university underscore the necessity for rethinking CTE, advocating for a digital literacies approach to better equip pre-service teachers. The first study reveals how an elective course on digital literacies empowered teachers during ERT, fostering confidence in using diverse digital resources. Participants noted its relevance amidst digital divide issues exacerbated by the pandemic. The second study examines students' perspectives on ERT, emphasizing widespread digital exclusion and the inadequate integration of technologies by professors. Despite challenges, students recognized the potential of digital technologies for enhancing language learning. Both studies underscore the urgent need for comprehensive CTE reform that integrates digital technologies and literacies systematically. They advocate for a curriculum that not only equips teachers with technical skills but also fosters critical integration of technologies into pedagogical practices. The findings stress the necessity for policy changes to address digital inequality and enhance educational outcomes through innovative CTE practices aligned with contemporary digital realities.

Another important role HE is called upon to play, is the preparation of graduates in becoming employable in an ever-changing world. The demands of a competitive labor market, as highlighted by UNESCO (2015), emphasize the development of transversal skills, which education systems must now prioritize. HE institutions are thus tasked with shifting from purely academic “cognitive” skills to include essential “non-academic” skills and competencies to prepare graduates to face the challenges they will encounter in their future professions. In their chapter “The role of autonomous ESP learning in acquiring transversal professional development skills in Higher Education”, Androulla Athanasiou,

Elis Kakoulli Constantinou and Jack Burston advocate for a blended teaching approach in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, leveraging cloud technologies like Google Workspace for Education to foster these skills. Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) is proposed as an effective method to enhance learner autonomy and the development of transversal competencies. The paper provides suggestions on using various Google tools to facilitate collaborative, interactive, and flexible learning environments in ESP contexts. By integrating these technologies in the suggested PBL approach, HE language instructors can better equip students with the necessary skills to succeed professionally and personally in a dynamic world.

Acknowledging the importance of enhancing metacognitive skills, soft skills, and self-regulation, all essential for navigating the evolving job market and personal challenges, Dana Di Pardo Léon-Henri's chapter "Multimodal Reflective Journals and Life Writing: A Didactic Approach to Enhanced Learning" underscores the transformative role of reflective journaling and life writing in tertiary education, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing technological advancements. According to the author, reflective journaling and life writing allow students to explore personal narratives, fostering language proficiency, communication skills, empathy, and intercultural understanding. The study highlights their pedagogical value, showing how these practices promote holistic student growth and prepare graduates for diverse professional environments. Through qualitative inquiry and educational theory, the research demonstrates that engaging in reflective practices helps students develop critical self-awareness and adaptability, key competencies in a rapidly changing world.

The flipped classroom teaching method is another pedagogical model that the book explores. The chapter titled “Online Practices for Teaching English Grammar in Higher Education: Combining the Flipped Classroom with Digital Learning Paths” by Eirini Busack investigates the efficacy of integrating Digital Learning Paths (DLPs) with the flipped classroom approach to enhance grammar instruction for pre-service English teachers. This study, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, aims to address the sudden shift to online education by offering a seminar titled “Development of media-didactic competencies: Learning Paths & Digital Storytelling for Teaching English Grammar.” The seminar employed a mixed-methods research design, including a pre- and post-seminar grammar test and an online course evaluation survey, to measure improvements in grammar knowledge and communication skills. The study revealed positive results since the participants improved their grammar knowledge, exhibiting benefits and highlighting the effective integration of technology and pedagogy. The chapter underscores the importance of combining synchronous webinars with asynchronous DLPs to foster interactive and reflective learning environments, particularly beneficial for students who are shy or reluctant to participate in traditional face-to-face settings. The study concludes that while digital media alone does not guarantee improved learning outcomes, its didactic embedding and the change in pedagogical strategies are crucial. Future research is suggested to explore further pedagogical approaches to enhance the teaching of English grammar in the post-COVID era.

Another timely theme in this volume is the role of language as a vehicle for ideology and information in an increasingly connected and digital world. The contributor explores how language

educators can help students develop critical awareness of the ways in which language shapes and is shaped by societal forces. This critical perspective is essential for fostering informed and engaged global citizens. In her chapter “Integrating Critical Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom: A Proposed Framework for Developing Media Critical Literacy, Evagorou-Vassiliou discusses the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global digital systems and media literacy, emphasizing the rise of misinformation and its detrimental effects on public trust and democratic processes. The article advocates for enhanced critical language awareness (CLA) and media literacy education, particularly in navigating the complexities of digital communication. The proposed framework integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to empower students with analytical tools to deconstruct media texts, identify ideological biases, and discern socio-political implications. Emphasizing a hybrid learning model that combines technology with critical pedagogy, the framework suggests practical classroom implementations such as collaborative online learning activities and guided CDA analyses of authentic media texts. By focusing on transitivity and appraisal analysis, students learn to critically assess how language constructs power dynamics, assigns responsibility, and shapes public perception. The article underscores the role of language centers in promoting critical thinking and media literacy skills, positioning educators as facilitators in preparing students to engage critically with media content. Overall, the study argues that integrating CLA and media literacy into educational curricula is essential for equipping individuals with the skills necessary to navigate and contribute responsibly to today’s media-driven world.

In the book, readers can also read about Virtual Exchange (VE) as a high-impact, meaningful teaching and learning practice with the broad reach of digital technologies in a post-pandemic world. VE projects connect learners from different backgrounds and foster intercultural awareness. In their chapter “Turning Tables: Redesigning Virtual Exchange through the Learners’ Experience”, Laura Rampazzo and Viviane Klen-Alves Moore explore the impact of VE on Brazilian undergraduate students’ language learning and intercultural competence. Using a mixed-method approach to gather both qualitative and quantitative data through structured questionnaires, their results indicate that VE effectively fosters language and intercultural learning, autonomy, and reflective practices. The participants provided insights into the program’s strengths and areas for improvement and highlighted the importance of timely mediation sessions and optimized scheduling to enhance engagement. The chapter presents a learner-centered approach to VE, suggesting that integrating participants’ evaluations can significantly enhance the program’s effectiveness and provide valuable insights for broader application in intercultural education contexts. The analysis aligns with the teletandem framework, emphasizing social interaction, collaboration, and autonomous learning. The chapter also underscores the necessity of incorporating participants’ feedback into VE redesign to better meet learners’ needs and expectations.

We are confident that the insights and research presented in “Innovative Language Teaching Practices in Higher Education in a Post-COVID Era” will inspire educators, researchers, and policy-makers alike. This volume is a testament to the ingenuity and dedication of language educators who continue to push the boundaries of what is possible in the pursuit of excellence in education.