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**FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

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**Abstract:** Language is generally perceived as the medium of communication of ideas and thoughts. Recent technological advancements have aided the processes of language communication. When we speak about technology, we normally refer to computers and digitalization. However, technology indeed refers to anything that is produced, assembled and that makes our lives easier. Social media previously related through television programs of any kind, can now be easily accessed through mobile devices, computers, and video conferencing software. Language teaching and learning in general, and foreign language teaching and learning in particular, have evolved in the digital age, especially as we move from single language users to a more bilingual or even plurilingual society. Foreign language takes on a new meaning in the digital age. With the emergence of Information and Instructional Technologies and their influence on teaching and learning it becomes a must to equip faculty members and students with the necessary skills to handle these developments and utilize their benefits in teaching and learning. The swift development of new technologies and their universal application in education requires innovative methods and approaches in teaching and learning a language in the digital age. This paper provides an overview of how technology has evolved in time and how it contributes to language communication, alongside political, economic and social lines in the Republic of Macedonia in general and at the Southeast European University in particular. The Mission of the University is to seek excellence in teaching and research within the higher education system in the Republic of Macedonia, by offering equal opportunities for all based on impartiality and merit. One of the key elements of the mission of the University includes active cooperation with universities in the Republic of Macedonia as well as with international universities. The main aim under which the university is governed and managed is to contribute to higher education in the Albanian language, through a mutual interethnic understanding and aims to provide a multilingual and multicultural approach to teaching and research by developing study programs according to broad European and international standards. In this respect, we will also focus on the latest trends in the area of language learning in the digital age and the efforts that our university is making in order to keep in step with them, especially through several of its units that have been specifically established with this mission in mind, such as the e-learning center and the language center.

**Keywords:** digitalization; e-learning; information technology; internationalization; skills

**LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL IMPACT**

Language is generally perceived as the medium of communication of ideas and thoughts. Recent technological advancements have aided the processes of language communication. When we speak about technology, we normally refer to computers and digitalization. However, technology indeed refers to anything that is produced, assembled and that makes our lives easier. Social media previously related through television programs of any kind, can now be easily accessed through mobile devices, computers, and video conferencing software. This visual, distant and remote audio and video communication through technology is the closest we have come to having authentic conversations with the ability to interpret oral language as well as gestures.

Immediate access to the internet provides us with the opportunity to instantly access information and make connections with others and external resources. In this respect, visual media allow us to carry out more extensive research about language in all its forms and shapes.

**LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING**

Language teaching and learning in general, and foreign language teaching and learning in particular, have evolved in the digital age, especially as we move from single language users to a more bilingual or even plurilingual society. Foreign language takes on a new meaning in the digital age. Foreign language can be perceived as the external language. The first language is the internal language or the language of the community in which we live or are born. It is generally perceived as the mother tongue. However, bi- or plurilinguals can speak more than one language which is learned and used in a neighbourhood, from an early age. Having such linguistic capabilities is not uncommon in some countries such as Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, and even Spain or India. In the former two countries, there are various different ethnic communities that cohabit in the same region. In Macedonia, for example, the Albanian community is quite big (about 30%) and they also reside in pretty focused regions of north-

western and south-western Macedonia; therefore, they consider Albanian as their first language, and Macedonian as their second, regardless of the fact that the latter is an official language across the whole country and only recently Albanian became an official language but only in areas where there are more than 20% of the Albanian community. There are even cases when people have learned both languages at the same time, starting from a very early age. Similarly, in Kosovo there is a Serbian minority which speak their mother tongue, i.e. Serbian, but they can also speak Albanian quite well, due to the reasons mentioned above. The same applies for Kosovo Albanians, especially those who reside in urban areas, and who can speak Serbian quite because they used to cohabit with one another for quite a long period if time.

Government policies that promote certain official languages over others, globally, create language hierarchies openly as well as secretly. Propositions of declaring and using only one language over the others, can invalidate and devalue heritage and minority languages in a mainstream society. This has been the case in Macedonia and in many other countries in the Balkans as well as in Europe, where language hierarchies exist (Beardsmore, 2008; Young & Helot, 2003).

However, recent policy measures in countries around the world are promoting heritage and minority language revitalization. The European Union is promoting a more plurilingual approach that also recognizes regional languages (Beardsmore, 2008; Winstead, 2013). Despite worldwide efforts to preserve and value multiple languages, dominant versus subordinate language hierarchies continue to exist based on prior colonial situations and issues of territorial conflict, acquisition, and transnationalism.

In the field of foreign language, placement tests have been developed to assign students of diverse backgrounds into the appropriate levels of foreign language classes at universities. For example, at the Southeast European University (Tetovo, Northern Macedonia), there are three institutional official languages: Albanian, Macedonian and English. And the ethnic composition of employees there is also mixed. As far as the students are concerned, they are mostly Albanians from Macedonia as well as from Kosovo and a few from Albania and students of Macedonian ethnic background. When it comes to attending language courses, the situation is as follows:

- All students have to attend four semesters of English language courses, which include Basic English Courses, English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes. In order to do this, all first-year students who enrol at our university, have to take an English Placement Test;
- Students of Albanian ethnic background that come from Northern Macedonia, also take a placement test in Macedonian and attend Macedonian Language Courses for two semesters;
- Students of Albanian ethnic background that come from Kosovo and Albania, are directly placed at the beginners' level of Macedonian language course because they have no Macedonian language background at all, and they also attend the first two elementary levels of Macedonian;
- Finally, Macedonian students are also directly placed into the beginner's level of Albanian language courses, because they as well, have very little or no knowledge at all in Albanian, even though they have also cohabitated in many areas in Macedonia with their Albanian peers. The reasons behind this were mentioned above.

#### **TECHNOLOGY- AND COMPUTER-ASSISTED FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

Key aspects that promote a successful learning experience for our students, regardless if they study certain languages or just take languages courses in order to advance their general language and communication skills, in a technology-enhanced environment, especially a web environment, include the following:

- Institutional support with appropriate technology to meet the learner's needs in the language learning environment (e.g. software and hardware requirements, high speed internet);
- Specific instruction and learner training to ensure continuous learning (e.g. technology software, troubleshooting ability);
- Authentic digital opportunities for student-to-student language interaction;
- Spatial organization and up-to-date technology and computers to help students get the most of their language courses.

These aspects not only enhance the learning for the students, but also benefit to the instructor. Additionally, institutional support should be available as well as release time for instructors to engage in digital language learning professional development that supports instruction and research in foreign language education.

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) was an appropriate notion in the field of computer-mediated language study, but it may not be inclusive of other forms of technology in the digital age. The creation of interactive web 2.1 technology, mobile technology, etc., has brought education to a new stage. Therefore, Technology-Assisted

Language Learning could a far more appropriate term to use, since it is broader and includes an entire group of technological possibilities beyond the computer.

### **LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE DIGITAL AGE AT SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY**

The Mission of the University is to seek excellence in teaching and research within the higher education system in the Republic of Macedonia, by offering equal opportunities for all based on impartiality and merit. One of the key elements of the mission of the University includes active cooperation with universities in the Republic of Macedonia as well as with international universities. The main aim under which the university is governed and managed is to contribute to higher education in the Albanian language, through a mutual interethnic understanding and aims to provide a multilingual and multicultural approach to teaching and research by developing study programmes according to broad European and international standards.

Having this in mind, the Southeast European University established two very important centres, which are an added value to the institution itself. No other university in the region has such centres, meaning that we nurture a different approach as far as technology and language learning are concerned.

#### **THE LANGUAGE CENTRE**

The Language Centre was founded in 2001 and was the first independent unit to provide instruction within South-East European University (SEEU). It provides language services to all SEEU students. Its 20 well-equipped classrooms, and the Language Resource Centre (LaRC) are designed to meet the educational needs of the students, staff and the community as well as create an environment that is conducive to learning.

Language study is a central part of every SEEU student's academic career, both as required subjects and as optional elective courses. Part of the University's mission is to promote a multilingual approach to learning, stressing both the importance of local and international languages. The Language Centre has the crucial role in achieving this goal. The primary function of the Centre is to provide courses specified in the curricula of the five SEEU faculties. Due to these requirements and student interest, the LC is the largest teaching organization at the University, with more than three quarters of the entire student population taking classes there at any given time.

#### **THE LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (LARC)**

The Language Resource Center is a resource and tutoring room for both SEEU students and teachers of foreign languages. It houses a large collection of resource books, several computer terminals, television and VCR and DVD players. It is staffed by students and is open every weekday. Language Center teachers also hold part of their regular consultation hours here and are on-hand for most of the opening hours to work individually with students. The LaRC has expanded and developed specifically to meet the present and future needs of post-graduate students pursuing degrees in ELT.

#### **THE ELEARNING CENTRE - IT TRAINING AND EDUCATION**

With the new emerging Information and Instructional Technologies and their influence on teaching and learning it becomes a must to equip faculty members with the necessary skills to handle with these developments and utilize their benefits in teaching and learning. The eLearning Centre assists the University community in exploiting the potential of technology to enhance teaching and learning. One of the primary goals of the eLearning Centre is to promote quality self-paced, learner-centred education through the development and delivery of quality web-based courses that can be delivered completely online. Furthermore, the eLearning Centre provides assistance in enhancing teaching and learning effectiveness through the development of interactive online supplementary material to traditional courses as well as organizing training workshops related to the development and delivery of online material.

The eLearning Centre strives to be the leader in e-Learning in the Balkans region and lead the efforts towards effective utilization of web-based education to enhance teaching and learning. eLearning Centre mission is preparing educators empowered with the knowledge and skills in eLearning to deliver outstanding teaching experience. The Centre has undertaken the following objectives as the means to accomplish its mission:

- Increase SEEU Community awareness of the potential of e-learning in enhancing teaching and learning;
- Promote the development and delivery of quality online courses;
- Provide training and support consistent with the best information about the latest development in e-learning subject, best practices and quality online teaching;
- Ensure educational quality and efficiency in e-learning activities.

The eLearning Centre provides a number of services to the university community in order to achieve its objectives. Services and activities currently being offered by the eLearning Centre include:

- **Awareness Events**  
The eLearning Centre regularly organize workshops on different issues related to eLearning like benefits and limitations of e-Learning, instructional design, online teaching, etc... Professionals of international repute in eLearning are invited to conduct these events.
- **Training Workshops**  
Hands-on training programs are frequently conducted for SEEU faculties to enable them to develop effective online instruction. These training programs cover a wide range of topics starting from instructional design of online courses where participants are introduced to various concepts and tools that help in designing pedagogically sound online courses to the development of online content using various development tools like Camtasia studio, Adobe Connect etc.
- **Online Instructional Material**  
The eLearning Centre provides support to develop online courses. Faculty members provide only the content of the online course and the support team in the eLearning Centre does the rest of the job. In addition, the eLearning Centre provides assistance to all faculty members to develop quality online instructional material to enhance student learning.

### **E-LEARNING QUALITY STANDARDS**

To ensure quality in all eLearning activities at SEEU, the Centre has started the development of guidelines and quality standards for eLearning processes like content development, course delivery, assessment and evaluation, copyright, online teaching etc.

### **LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM – GOOGLE CLASSROOM**

Google Classroom is a free web service developed by Google for schools that aim to simplify creating, distributing and grading assignments in a paperless way. The primary purpose of Google Classroom is to streamline the process of sharing files between teachers and students. Google Classroom combines Google Drive for assignment creation and distribution, Google Docs, Sheets and Slides for writing, Gmail for communication, and Google Calendar for scheduling. Students can be invited to join a class through a private code, or automatically imported from a school domain. Each class creates a separate folder in the respective user's Drive, where the student can submit work to be a graded by a teacher. Mobile apps, available for iOS and Android devices, let users take photos and attach to assignments, share files from other apps, and access information offline. Teachers can monitor the progress for each student, and after being graded, teachers can return work along with comments. (<https://www.seeu.edu.mk/en/centres> )

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: CHALLENGES TO TRADITIONS AND VALUES**

The digital age does not imply that traditional approaches should not be used and applied, or that they are not useful today. I am referring to the face-to-face learning and non-digital modes of learning and teaching, which we are still doing, as a matter of fact. And, in my opinion, we need to continue doing so, because that is the only way to comprehend, understand and value the uniqueness of human culture and virtues. Lacking digitalization and technology, does not always mean that those cultures or communities are really “outdated” or “primitive”. Indeed, the opposite may happen, and we may end up with young generations of people who lack the basic elements of real human-to-human communication, or general attitude and behaviour in groups of real people, not virtual ones, where no one knows no one.

Reconsidering the role of technology in a human society means to leave some breathing space for people from all stages of life by setting up boundaries rather than pushing everyone to accept new technologies or digital demands. Although it has facilitated all levels of communication and promotion of individualism online, digital technology in its current form also has the potential of erasing individuality and promoting commonality, which I do not think is a good omen for humanity as a whole.

A bit of everything would make life more interesting!

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