

## Foreign Languages Turned Into Second Languages through ICTs

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### Abstract

*The need to learn foreign languages is constantly and enormously increased due to globalization, migration, mobility, and tourism, and contact with the target foreign language and culture (FL&C) is essential for proper learning. While the term 'second language' is used to refer to a language abundantly present where it is taught or learned (e.g. Italian in Rome), the concept of 'foreign language' implies distance to, absence of, and slim contact with a certain language and its continent cultures (e.g. English in Rome). Then, proximity to, and/or presence of a language in a given geographical area are essential for sociolinguistic categorization into a foreign or second language, and determine the pedagogical approach and design a country or region, and educational stakeholders are to take for instruction. By bringing the FL&C as close as our home, office and classroom, ICTs can break down geographical barriers and educational constraints.*

*By reviewing literature from the sociolinguistic, psycho-linguistic and educational technology fields, we investigated the bringing-closer feature of ICTs which may facilitate de contact with a target FL&C. This paper reviews literature on the second and foreign language concepts, and studies on the pedagogical effects of using ICTs to approach the target FL&C.*

*ICT has qualitatively transformed everyday communication and information practices in the commercial, financial, professional, educational, recreational, and interpersonal realms [1]. In the language learning arena ICT has moved many educators from cognitivist assumptions about knowledge and learning as brain/local phenomena to contextual, collaborative, and social interactional approaches to language development [2]. In a similar way ICTs have effectively reduced the 'distant' feature of foreign languages and transform them into a surrounding element. This has been achieved by the possibility of unlimited and everyday access to the universe of a target FL&C in the form of information and knowledge, didactical materials in a wide variety of formats, numerous native speakers for interpersonal synchronous and asynchronous communication within language-specific learner and/or teacher forums, hobby and personal interest blogs or otherwise.*

### 1. Introduction

Since the nineties, several fields of linguistics have highlighted the relationship between language and culture. Byram (1989) refers to the importance of relating them by saying:

The meanings of a particular language point to the culture of a particular social grouping, and the analysis of those meanings- their comprehension by learners and other speakers -- involves the analysis and comprehension of that culture...The tendency to treat language quite independently of the culture to which it constantly refers, cannot be justified; it disregards the nature of language (p.41)[3].



Cultural content can be divided in two areas. One is material everyday culture: clothing, food, and drink, the use of space and time, non-verbalised (implicit, silent) customs, traditions of upbringing and learning strategies, etc. The other area is visual representations of every kind: art, photography, painting, cartoons, TV, films, sports coverage, etc. [4] [5].

This paper illustrates how ICTs mediate with the language and culture, thus facilitating and enhancing language learning and teaching. It is worth mentioning that majority and minority languages are deemed alike in all of our assumptions, and that although a considerable amount of literature analysed for the purpose of this paper addresses the teaching or learning of English, we treated information and knowledge therein independently of the language they referred to.

## **2. Fundamental concepts: first, second and foreign language**

For the purpose of definition, it is appropriate to distinguish between the role a language has in the language learning background of an individual and the role it has in the society. In the individual role, the relevant feature is at what point in life the individual has acquired (informally) or learnt (formally) the language and for what purpose. The societal role refers to the linguistic policy, the historical and cultural background, and the number of speakers in an area (e.g. national, official, majority or minority). In this sense, for example, French is the national, official and majority language in France, but a minority language in Italy.

Then, the 'first language' or 'mother tongue' --which is not of main concern for this text-- is the language typically learned in the family in early childhood as part of one's fundamental social, emotional and intellectual development; it is the language one identifies with, is most proficient at, and uses most [6].

'Second language' (L2) is defined in the Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, as "a basic term with several somewhat different definitions" [7]. Referring to the 'individual role' a L2 is defined as that learnt after learning the first language in infancy in the home [6] [7], for example in the playground, at school or at work "in order to function in many contexts within the language community" (p. 8)[4]. Referring to the societal role of language, a L2 is that "heart and used in the immediate environment outside the home" (p.574)[6], and Oxford (1996) related this aspect of L2 to motivation by adding that "the learner of the L2 is surrounded by stimulation, both visual and auditory, in the target language and thus has many motivational and instructional advantages"(p.4) [8]

The 'foreign language'(FL) is defined in its individual role as the language not learned as a child, and whose "aim may be more specific, e.g. to be able to read specialized literature or fiction in the original language or to be able to use the language during brief stays in one of the target-language countries" (p. 8) [4], and learnt in a formal classroom setting [7]. Whereas in its societal role, a FL is not used daily or typically in the environment as the medium of ordinary communication" (e.g. Chinese as it is usually learned all over Europe) (p.574)[6] [8], then as learners have limited or no opportunities for [its] use outside the classroom [7], they typically receive input in the new language only in the classroom and by rather artificial means. In this sense, FL environments contrast with L2 settings [8]. With a territorially based approach, a FL has been traditionally referred to as "a language that is spoken abroad' (p.18) [4].

While the L2 "is existentially important for the person in question, who needs it in order to be able to live as a participating citizen in society, with all that it entails" (p.7)[4], the FL may still have a significant role to play: it may be an important school subject, the language of certain courses at a university, or at least of a large percentage of the students' textbooks, or it may be necessary to pass an examination in that



language to enter a university or obtain a position or job, or it may be essential for people who work in certain market sectors or niches like tourism, technology, or business.

Cognitively speaking, there exist few differences in acquiring/learning a language as a late L2 or a FL, but obviously linguistic surroundings are completely different in nature and intensity, i.e. to be in an area or network where the language in question is the dominant first language [4].

### **3. Flows fostering FL learning**

#### **3.1 Linguistic and cultural flows**

The FL&C contents are usually thought to be found exclusively or specially within the limits of the country where the FL is the official or a dominating language (e.g. English in England, but less in Australia or Japan, and far less in Belgium or Poland). However, transnational migration generates networks with a worldwide potential for numerous languages. When one has learned a FL, one travels with it, either for tourism, for university studies, or for immigration purposes. More precisely, "it is not 'the languages' that flow but the various interlanguages" (p.95) [4] (i.e. linguistic systems developed by not fully proficient speakers of learned languages). In connection with globalization and intensified transnational mobility Risager argues that there are many cases in which it is possible to note a glide from language functioning as a FL towards it functioning as a L2, and exemplifies this: if a Danish woman marries a Turkish immigrant in Denmark and learns his (minority) language; Turkish functions as a L2 for her as she speaks it daily within that FL community; and she may also use Turkish to communicate beyond the home and family environment, either in Denmark or abroad.

The transnational exchange of commodities also involves a linguistic exchange of brands, advertizing, slogans and lifestyle features from various language areas. This linguistic diversity can be observed in TV commercials, newspapers, and in the streets in urban centers [11].

#### **3.2 ICT-based linguistic flows**

Via the use of ICTs, the networks acquire an extraterritorial dimension: the concept of 'language' area, gains a new content. The concept normally includes the countries where the concerned language is mostly spoken as first language, e.g. 'the German language area'. But the concept should be redefine to cover the potentially worldwide networks in which the language is used, adding that the networks are particularly intensive in those states or areas where the language involved is spoken as a first language or L2 [4]. Additionally, "the internet has come to comprise many languages that anyone interested has direct access to" (p.10) [11], and while there was once a fear that the Internet would jeopardize language diversity, quite the opposite seems to be occurring [9] [10].

Communication with people in FL contexts (non-target language countries) can also take place through the internet, where there are an infinite number of potential contacts throughout the world – and there are many examples in present-day FL teaching of an interest in ICT [11]. The Web was initially dominated by the US, and early developments were in English and other Romanized alphabets, but it is now wide open.

#### **3.3 ICT-enhanced communication flow for FL teaching and learning**



While textbooks and readers offer selected topics as a basis for FL cultural pedagogy, the Internet and the web provide a virtually inexhaustible source of authentic FL&C resources, undoubtedly responsive to the interests of the student. The challenge for the teacher is to come up with well-defined activities that foster interaction, creation and collaboration.

In relation to the usual image of FL teaching as an isolated learning space where linguistic and cultural learning take place [12], there is an expressed need for re-conceptualisations that present language teaching as a practice that transforms its cultural flow 'into' the learning space and lets something 'out' to the outside world [4]. In recent years, language learners have come to be described in terms of 'cultural mediators', 'border-crossers', negotiators of meaning', 'intercultural speakers' and such like. Language learning is becoming increasingly defined in cultural terms and these new names and targets for language learners imply a re-conceptualisation of the language learning endeavour [13]. In countries which achieve good results in FL teaching, it is well organised and, for example, young Western Europeans often have additional extensive exposure to the language outside school through media, travel, exchanges, etc. [6]. Also, in comparing the language learning results in different contexts, study-abroad contexts outperform at-home contexts [14].

The Internet "does not exist as a neutral medium, it is rather a cultural artifact" (p.437) [ 2] . Then, it is no longer a question of whether to take advantage of ICTs in FL instruction, but of how to harness them and guide our students in their use. Authentic, meaningful, interactive, student-centred, Web-based learning activities can improve student performance in much the same manner as learning the language and culture while studying abroad. Evidence abounds in the changing curricular patterns; the impressive Internet presence of language teachers; the appearance of new and improved Web research tools, strategies, online reference works and electronic resources; and the development of ICTs that facilitate cross-cultural communication and collaboration [15].

The rigid dichotomization between 'real' and 'virtual', completely dissolves under close examination of lived communicative practice, especially among the digital native generation [2]. Since the advent of ICTs, FL pedagogy has been revitalized by new terms and concepts like 'Internet-based', 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC), 'web-enhanced' (WELL) and 'computer-assisted' (CALL), and more recently mobile-assisted (MALL) language learning.

Students and faculty can instantly search online information on the FL&C (e.g. talking dictionaries, Google hits, song lyrics, etc.). In this way, ICTs have notably impacted the language teaching and teacher role by bringing about opportunities and challenges for teachers and learners alike [12]. Effective use of ICT-based tools and resources assist the FL teacher by fuelling students' motivation to get into the FL&C. Since ICTs have evolved and they are no longer a medium for exploration, but one of practice and collaboration, ICTs help to easily execute educational basic competences like collect, communicate, create, and collaborate.

### **3. Final comments**

While we respect the above mentioned definitions provided by renowned linguists and pedagogues, we assume that –as anybody else-- they could foresee neither the dizzy development ICT have had, nor its enhancement of the educational process, nor the ICT user acceptance rates observed along the last years. Thus, we claim that those referential definitions are no longer accurate since --with ICT-- the so-called 'foreign' language has acquired characteristics once only present in the 'second' language definitions. And this applies to features in both the individual and the societal role of language. Thus, the



FL can now be "heart and used in the immediate environment", and consequently, learners can be "surrounded by stimulation, both visual and auditory". Additionally, some features of the traditional FL concept are no longer true: "a language with limited presence where the learner lives" can certainly "be used daily", offers plenty of "opportunities for its use outside the classroom", and can "typically receive input in the new language in the classroom", and that "by rather natural means".

This new pattern should close the traditional gap between L2 and FL associated to the dichotomization between face-to-face and ICT-enhanced communication, i.e. 'real' versus 'virtual' that, in Thorne's words, "the anachronistic epistemological prescriptivism" (p.437)[ 2] that we argue has kept FL&C pedagogy in a rear position behind other subject matters to integrate ICTs.

Then, whereas the development of ICT has required the reconceptualization of communication in the financial, work and entertainment realms, and whereas in the educational arena, cognitivist assumptions about learning moved from local phenomena to interactional approaches, we argue that in the FL&C pedagogy, the so-called 'foreign' language should be redefined and no longer be seen as a synonym of 'absent', 'distant' or inaccessible'.

This change and the consequent need of reconceptualization have seeded our further and ongoing research. It looks at the potential of ICTs as a mediating tool with the FL&C for FL teachers to integrate ICTs to their autonomous lifelong learning and that of the learners' through instruction.

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