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Online language teaching in times of change: a CALL to action for language teachers and educators

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Abstract: Change, whether slowly developing over decades or rapid change caused by worldwide crises, affects education and educators profoundly. This article argues for a change in language teacher education embracing the changing world of online communication, and emphasising the epistemological awareness language teachers need to bring to the online classroom. Based on Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) research and best practice examples from across the world, the paper outlines past changes, contextualises online language teaching in the wider area of online communication and describes progress in practice, theory and epistemological understanding of online teaching. It culminates in a series of evidence-based suggestions for future training and education of language teachers that will integrate adequate pedagogy and an enhanced epistemological understanding.

Keywords: language teacher education; online teaching; epistemology

1 Introduction

“Panta rhei” (“Everything is in flow”). This famous saying of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus is often used to emphasise that change always happens, yet it might go unnoticed by the human eye. As a simile Heraclitus uses the image of a river: we see it as one river, yet the flowing waters mean that it is never the same river, always something new and different.

In contrast to this permanent, unnoticed change, the word “seachange” expresses a sudden, massive change. In the words of the Oxford dictionary: “a profound or notable transformation.”

In this paper, I will argue that communication in education in general and in language learning specifically has seen both of these types of changes: a slow, continuous development of technology use that attracted attention only from a

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relatively small number of experts; and the sudden, massive change of the COVID pandemic that forced millions of educators to embrace new ways of communicating with their students within weeks. Accelerated through the pandemic, we have seen a multitude of professional development initiatives for in-service teachers that have been driven by the need to catch up with technological advances and as reactions to emergencies (e.g. Borg 2022; Tafazoli and Meihami 2023).

The training provided so far, however, has not yet fully reflected that the changes seen in our communication and use of technology are much more than superficial changes in media use; properly recognized, they necessitate a fundamental need to adapt our understanding of how knowledge is generated (i.e. epistemology). Consequently, language teachers need to fundamentally understand these epistemological changes in order to guarantee that language education is fit for communication practices of the 21st century. Explicit epistemological considerations that understand the changing world of communication in the 21st century under a fundamentally meaning-making perspective are indispensable for in-service training. In addition, future language practitioners will also benefit from integrating this perspective into their pre-service education. This paper will therefore contextualise online language teaching within ongoing technological changes; suggest ways of subtly shifting professional development for language teachers; and it will attempt to stimulate the debate about the underlying assumptions of the nature of meaning-making in a foreign language that has the power to change the way language teachers are being prepared for their role.

The first part of the article will outline the two types of changes: the slow but continuous change that has happened over the past decades through the integration of digital technologies into our everyday lives and into language teaching, and the “seachange”. The latter, radical change, caused when the pandemic enforced the take-up of online language teaching, has thrown into stark relief what has been missing but also what is possible to achieve within a short timespan. This historic mapping of changes will help to contextualise that the necessity for change is not only relevant in an emergency but has been developing steadily over the last decades. In the next section, I will describe research and initiatives that support teachers in their online language teaching. Taking the wider view, based on decades of research, I outline support for language teacher education on a practical, theoretical and epistemological level. Finally, based on the identified need and existing expertise, our desiderata for necessary changes in language teacher training will be delineated.

2 How language teaching has changed

2.1 Slow change

Slow change happens over time, sometimes only noticeable in retrospect. And whether the perceived source of the change was identified as societal developments

(New London Group 1996) or technological innovations (Jung 2005; Warschauer 1997; Warschauer and Healey 1998), language teaching has been adapting to circumstances as and when needed. Educational research into language teaching has kept pace, following with its investigations the move from classroom-based teaching to – at first – experimental computer assisted language teaching (Levy 2024) to blended and online learning (Davies et al. 2013; Hampel and de los Arcos 2013). The more “normalised” (Bax 2003, 2011) technology became for language teaching, the more proliferous studies into technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) became (Stickler and Shi 2016). However, as the following detailed overview attempts to show: without contextualising tool and technology use within in a wider view of communication, educational research in computer assisted language learning (CALL) would remain restricted to an ancillary status in teacher training.

Categorising the research undertaken over the past decades pre-pandemic reveals at least four distinct areas in CALL or TELL and teaching: studies of changing tools and applications; a focus on changing access to information; studies investigating the immediacy of opportunities for authentic communication; and changes in pedagogy necessitated or engendered by a move from output-centred drill to process-centred communication. In the Chinese context, the same timeframe also saw a move away from applying traditional Confucian pedagogy to the teaching of foreign languages to integrating Western-style communicative pedagogies (Shi 2006). The next paragraphs will sketch briefly what these types of research have shown.

Detailed studies of technology use have taught us, for example, about the importance of screens and how they are employed in a language classroom (Leis and Wilson forthcoming; Meskill 2024). Overviews of tools and apps and “clever” ways of employing them in language teaching have filled and are still filling shelves in libraries and virtual collections. The benefit of such studies for practical purposes remains without doubt and this type of research has sometimes found its way into teacher training as necessary skills development or “up-skilling” yet failing to acknowledge a wider context of change.

The wider changes, e.g. in access to information, were described thirty years ago by the New London Group (1996) who evaluated this access critically. Ironically, however, although their analysis of societal and pedagogic changes in language and literacy seems almost prophetic, their statement about media use from the mid-1990 now reads a bit quaint: “We may have cause to be sceptical about sci-fi visions of information superhighways and an impending future where we are all virtual shoppers.” (p. 64) Compare to this the studies on lMOOCs (Martín Monje 2024) and web-based machine translation (Niño 2024; von Lindeiner-Stráský and Gargett 2024), and it becomes obvious how much has changed, albeit slowly, over the past thirty years.

Where information is almost instantaneously accessible to learners, pedagogies that position the teacher in the centre as font of all wisdom become obsolete. Language teachers have morphed into information brokers and mediators providing and easing access to “real life” authentic language use, for example, in the form of eTandem (Lewis and Walker 2003; Lewis and O'Dowd 2016) or eTwinning (Fearn 2021). These pedagogically informed virtual exchanges are a rich field for research into language learning and teaching (see, e.g. Gijzen et al. 2024; Sadler and Dooly 2022) which has led to a deeper understanding of communication in online spaces (e.g. Satar 2024; Satar and Wigham 2017). Attempts are now under way to integrate the findings from such studies into teacher training (e.g. evolve-erasmus.eu; unicollaboration.org).

The call for learner-centred pedagogy has been heard since the 1970s. An early indication that its advance into language teaching has become inevitable was the 2006 Special Issue of the CALICO journal conceived and edited by myself and a colleague (see also Hauck and Stickler 2006; Stickler and Hauck 2006). Since then, numerous publications investigating the shifts from “drill and kill” applications in CALL to creative and authentic communication as principle of the teaching of languages with technology have appeared (see, e.g. Shi and Kan 2023). Specific examples of learner-centred language learning pedagogies making use of technology, are project-based language learning (see Sampurna 2019; Stickler et al. 2024) or Maker spaces (Dubreil and Caspar 2024) amongst others. The creative potential of using different media and modes in making meaning are being exploited in multiple ways, and researched using multimodal, multiliteracy, and semiotic methodologies.

In the light of what will be described in the next section, we could count the slowly growing interest in CALL and TELL research and practice as serendipitous: it meant that albeit small in number, the CALL research community was prepared for the massive and rapid change in teaching that was brought about by the pandemic in the three years from late 2019 to 2022.

2.2 The sea change

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the globe in ways few of us had seen in our lifetimes although there have been precedents in some areas (see e.g. Shrestha 2023). An overview of how language teaching changed in different countries across the world can be found in Germain-Rutherford and colleagues' handbook chapter “Impact of the Pandemic on Language Education: Voices from Across the World” (Germain-Rutherford et al. 2024). In this chapter, authors from Canada, the Czech Republic, Chile, Iran, Spain and the UK describe how governments and institutions tried to cope with restrictions while maintaining educational provision for millions of

students. The closure of educational institutions led to a rapid and massive move to online teaching with subsequent demands on the support of online teaching experts. As the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) Secretariat states: “Suddenly, technology which had sometimes been regarded as the preserve of ‘specialists’ and avoided by those who felt ill-prepared, was not only easily accessible but enabled us all to do things in different and sometimes better ways.” (ECML 2023, p. 7)

Immediate reactions of teachers on the ground were perhaps less optimistic than our post-pandemic reflections: teachers felt unprepared and stressed (MacIntyre et al. 2020) and were clamouring for support and training. Many experts in technology enhanced language learning reacted quickly to provide collegial support to inexperienced language teachers during the pandemic years (see e.g. Sykes 2020). Together with Martina Emke, we tried to capture some of the stories of help and support given in the edited volume “Crises and Creativities” (Stickler and Emke 2023b). An international group of long-time collaborators of the ECML, the ICT REV team, supply an example for providing quick and informal help, offering a series of webinars for teachers preparing them for the use of online language teaching (ECML 2020). These three webinars, presented in English, French and German in May 2020, were attended by almost 2,800 participants (Robbins and Hopkins 2023). When asked about what they would take back to normal teaching, these teachers, who had just experienced the first few weeks of “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges et al. 2020), gave a wide variety of answers from “nothing” to “everything”. Some felt predominantly negative about the enforced change, others were enthusiastic and saw the move to online teaching as a unique chance for a change in teaching method.

Whereas these findings are anecdotal, a similar range of responses can be found in the more systematic surveys undertaken by Moser et al. (2021), the British Council (Mavridi 2022) and by the ECML in 2021 and 2022 (Brown 2023; Rüschoff 2022). Significantly, the ECML’s 2022 survey shows evidence of optimism and positive changes in the practice of language teachers (Brown 2023, p. 23).

The effects of the pandemic are here to stay with us and with education for a long time. They have led to changes in how teachers perceive their roles (Stickler and Emke 2023a) and how students expect to be treated in classrooms and beyond after experiencing more autonomy (Brown 2023). As Bernd Rüschoff concludes: “It may well be that the pandemic served as a catalyst for progress in attitudes and practices,” (Rüschoff 2023, p. 41). In addition, new challenges to traditional teaching and assessment, such as generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools that have come to the fore in the meantime will require more change and adaptation. We will continue to rely on what Heyworth calls teachers’ “creativity and resilience” (Heyworth 2023, p. 80). However, we will also need to look systematically at how language teacher education needs to be re-designed to reflect the past and current changes and to be prepared for future changes.

Based on my own and many colleagues' ongoing work with online language teachers, the next section will look at what has been achieved and what still needs to change to enhance the teachers' ability to cope with changing classrooms, changing pedagogies, and changing roles.

3 What has been achieved: in practice, theory, and epistemology

As described above, we have seen change over the past years in how languages are used and learned. To a certain degree, the in-service training of teachers also changed enforced by the emergency move to online teaching in 2020. However, most of the change has remained on a superficial level, helping teachers to cope with unfamiliar teaching methods and environments. One exception is the increased concern about teachers' psychological wellbeing. However, while this topic became prominent during the pandemic (MacIntyre et al. 2020; Shin 2023) the focus is still too often on coping strategies in times of stress rather than on helping teachers to make sense of a fundamentally changed mode of communication and integrate it into their teaching.

To depict the change that has happened more systematically over the past decades, I will now report on research and developments on three levels: the practical level of teacher training; the theoretical level of understanding and describing teachers' positionality vis-à-vis learning technologies; and the epistemological level of understanding how we generate meaning in online language learning environments.

3.1 Practice

On a practical level, teachers have developed new skills (Hampel and Stickler 2005; Stickler and Hampel 2015), from basic technical dexterity to the "higher" skills of facilitating online communication. This skills development was underpinned by empirical research (see e.g. Stickler and Shi 2013, 2017) and has led to systematic training provisions (see e.g. Stickler et al. 2020). Also, there is no doubt that experience plays an important role in the skilful, multifaceted task of online language teaching (Shi et al. 2017): less experienced teachers will remain preoccupied with technical issues, whereas skilful online educators can devote more time to content and the facilitation of social connections between their learners.

As useful as the skills training is for teachers, it could potentially remain on a very superficial level; there is always the danger that language teachers would try to

use their face-to-face methods and skills and apply them in an online environment which, however, functions according to different, multimodal principles (Li and Jiang 2024). These changing principles have not gone unnoticed and in certain contexts, students have been asking teachers to “relinquish their exclusive control of the classroom and to espouse the student-centered pedagogy that applied linguistics has promoted in the last thirty years.” (Kramsch 2013, p. xii). The pandemic has highlighted this changing nature of student expectations and brought it to the fore (Brown 2023). To fulfil student demands and to ensure that language teaching remains a “future-proof” profession, teachers need to react and to embrace change (Stickler and Emke 2023a). Research into online language teaching carried out at the Open University, UK, by myself and many colleagues over the past decades was built on practical work and experience and has resulted in considerable change in theoretical understanding.

3.2 Theory

As one of the outcomes of ongoing research, I have developed a framework that allows language teachers to position their teaching within a STAR structure of Space, Time, Assessment and Role (Stickler 2022). The STAR framework delineates conditions of their teaching that are relevant to language teachers and often dictated by external circumstances. In terms of space, this can mean whether teachers and students work together online, in a physical classroom or in hybrid or blended spaces. The STAR structure also emphasises that the traditional definition of space as physical environment has become obsolete and has been replaced by much more flexible and fluid arrangements. Consequently, defining a learning “space” becomes part of the meaning-making work of a language teacher, often in negotiation with their students (see also Stickler and Hampel 2015). For example, teachers might have to negotiate whether their class webpage becomes a shared authoring space or merely a repository for files. The privacy of blogs or Instagram accounts, copyright issues of co-created activities, the shelf life of creative productions, all these considerations play a role in the negotiation of a teaching and learning “space”.

The pandemic has once again played a crucial role in making educational practitioners and institutions aware of time constraints as an important condition for teaching. In several countries school times had to be negotiated around availability of space and electrical power (see Shrestha 2023), lessons had to be changed from synchronous in-person teaching to asynchronous online formats. Time is of particular importance in language teaching with its emphasis on spontaneous interaction as one key competence (CEFR; Council of Europe 2020). Language teachers will be given certain times for synchronous classes, often deemed too little

to reach the necessary level in the language learned (L2). As a reaction, educators developed the flipped classroom concept (Zainuddin and Halili 2016) where content could be presented beforehand and precious synchronous time could be devoted to speaking practice (see e.g. von Lindeiner-Stráský et al. 2022).

Assessment is another element of language teachers' predetermined structure; often regulated by institutional or governmental guidelines, teachers have to produce evidence of their students' progress and competences. Although in the light of changed communication the New London Group (1996) argued against assessment based on standards (p. 76, p. 86) even as far back as in the 1990s, the reality for most teachers today is still a curriculum that culminates in some form of standardised test.

The last element of the STAR structure describes the role of the teacher. In many cultures this is still the "sage on the stage" or the font of all wisdom. However, language teachers are also expert communicators and their role entails making creative use of given and of innovative means and modes of communication. They employ gesture, mime and facial expressions to direct their students' attention (O'Rourke and Stickler 2017). And they create safe spaces for students and their less-than-perfect utterances (and comprehend or re-interpret them) to encourage active learning.

While the STAR structure describes conditions that are often outside the power of language teachers to influence, there is still some freedom or "wiggle room" in most teaching environments; never more so than during the pandemic when traditional classroom rules were loosened or lost. Together with Lijing Shi, we developed a framework for describing this wiggle room or freedom for language teaching and called it the Three Axes. The framework was created in the context of our work with teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) but it can easily be applied to all teachers of languages.

Teachers have the power to shift the emphasis of their practice along the Three Axes of Visibility of Technology, Authenticity of Communication, and Role of the Teacher (Shi and Stickler 2021; see also Stickler 2022). On the first axis, the choice is on a scale from almost invisible or "normalized" (Bax 2003, 2011) technology use to very visible or "in-your-face" tools. For example, using a smartphone to send a message or take a picture is a "normal" activity nowadays, whereas showing a video on a VHS player would no longer go without comment. The axis is thus not purely a timeline (Hampel and de los Arcos 2013) but shows deep familiarity on the part of the teacher with current, up-to-date or even upcoming technology use (see also Thorne 2003). To make a skilful choice, the teacher must know their technologies, understand their pedagogic uses, and also be familiar with her students' habitual tool usage.

Authenticity of Communication is an axis where language teachers in the 21st century have considerably more freedom of movement than their predecessors. Apart from freely available content on the internet, the access to speakers and

learners of the L2 has also become much easier: communication opportunities with other speakers can be arranged at the drop of a proverbial hat. The language teacher has a range of choices from fairly inauthentic drill and kill activities to authentic tasks using access to current online resources to even near-immersive virtual experiences (see Hadjistassou and Avgousti 2024; Stickler et al. 2024).

Describing the Role of the Teacher on the one hand as a part of the STAR structure, and, on the other hand as one of the Three Axes might seem contradictory at first glance. However, the argument of this paper is exactly that: while the language teachers' traditional roles are circumscribed by institution and expectations, changes in communication and social structure are leading to a current and necessary change of traditional teacher roles. In the words of Claire Kramsch:

... the digital revolution is also a social revolution. The computer has ushered in not just a new technology but new ways of viewing knowledge, the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, and the very relation between teachers and their students and between the students themselves. (2013, p. xii)

Language teachers will have to take the initiative and embrace new roles if they want the profession to have a future (Stickler and Emke 2023a). Too easily can the “sage” or “font of all knowledge” in the outdated transmission model of teaching be replaced by generative AI; too facile are the arguments calling for a “universal language” to replace the onerous task of learning, practising and using any L2. In order to avoid redundancy, language teachers will need to make an effort to understand, employ and explain the new ways of meaning making.

3.3 Epistemology

Underlying the levels of change described above is a deeper level: the epistemological change as described – albeit in different terms – by Chun et al. (2016).

Technology provides new ways for languages, cultures, and the world to be represented, expressed, and understood. But those new ways of representing, expressing, and understanding cannot be counted on to develop automatically. (p. 76)

In its simplest, probably naïve form, epistemology describes the way we generate knowledge or justify beliefs. In a more constructivist view, epistemology becomes the main player in our negotiations for meaning. For language teachers, this is important as their job entails negotiations of meaning on a daily basis. Language teachers need to understand, not only the source and target language (L1 and L2) but also the cultural and historical context, the pragmatic purpose, the material embodiment, and the intended audience of the meanings their students want to express. Their job

of supporting learners in developing digital skills that allow them to communicate internationally is by no means trivial. In addition to the mediation between cultures and languages, the job of language teachers has become more complex through the “disruptive” (Hampel 2019) force of technologies. Whereas the calls for language pedagogies to include critical digital competencies (Darvin 2017), multimodal communication (Li and Jiang 2024), social presence online (Satar 2011, 2024), multi-literacies (Tzirides et al. 2024), augmented and virtual realities (Hadjistassou and Avgousti 2024) are multiple, the consequent need for teacher development in the fundamentals of online epistemological choices has yet to gain momentum.

Teachers of other subjects are facing difficulties moving their teaching online as well. Language teachers, however, have an additional challenge to cope with: in familiarising their students with a “foreign” language they also straddle at least two cultures which might entail different worldviews. Hidden underneath everyday metaphors might be fundamentally different ways of viewing the world. Speakers of Mandarin Chinese and English will be well aware of such discrepancies. As an example, English uses the preposition “behind” when referring to the historic past, as in “leaving the past behind”. This language use generates an image of a path before one’s eyes leading away from the past and into the future. In contrast, Chinese uses different spatial metaphors for temporal concepts. In the words for “day after tomorrow”, for example, the terms *hou tian* 后天 (literally “back day” are used). While German, as a different example, uses the spatial metaphor “Übermorgen” (literally “day above tomorrow”). The use of different metaphors has an impact on processing language (see, e.g. Li, et al. 2019), and may well have an impact on how people envisage and deal with concepts of reality. By describing the future as something “behind” and the past in front of one’s eyes, the visual conception is of a past that is known, i.e. has been seen and can be visualised, whereas the future is the unknown and therefore hidden outside our field of vision.

That language forms our way of thinking has been a topic of Western philosophy at least since Wittgenstein (1974/1922). Recently, however, the Western monopoly for epistemology has been cast into doubt by ethno-epistemologists (Mizumoto et al. 2020) who examine Western claims for knowledge making based on a deep understanding of non-Western languages, cultures and philosophies (e.g. Xu 2020). Language teachers have been fulfilling a similar role when “translating” metaphors from one context to another and opening their students’ minds to diverse worldviews and epistemologies by directing their attention to salient features of the language and culture they are learning.

After contextualising language teaching in a changing world and identifying practical, theoretical and epistemological niches in our research of online language teaching, the paper will now turn to the future and the necessity for change affecting the education and development of current and future language teachers.

4 How teacher training¹ needs to change

Technological advances have enabled and supported pedagogic development (Davies et al. 2013):

Trends such as task-based learning (TBL) and cognitive-constructivist approaches gradually found their match in digital technologies, as it was recognized that computer tools might be one option to facilitate the implementation of a methodology for language learning focusing more on authenticity in contents, contexts and tasks. (p. 26)

On the other hand, however, the technological developments also necessitated pedagogic change (Kramsch 2013, p. 72; New London Group 1996). These changes mean that it is time to reconsider the fundamental purpose of pedagogies. Taking the New London Group's statement "The role of pedagogy is to develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities." (1996, p. 72) as a starting point, we can consider the impact of social media on the status of learners:

In today's technologized global society, engaging with social media networks has been increasingly equated with obtaining access to social and cultural capital, online and offline identity management, and information literacy. (Klimanova and Murphy-Judy 2024, p. 323)

Consequently, language teachers need to support their learners' identity creation in virtual spaces, which – again – necessitates an understanding of the negotiated and ever-changing meaning of the "social and cultural capital" acquired and lost so easily in social networks.

What is needed now is taking seriously the fundamental changes that have happened to communication, languages and online meaning-making and integrating this into a much-needed strategy for the preparation of teachers to successfully move (language) teaching online. The wiggle room between the given (the STAR structure) and the possible (movement along the Three Axes) is the ideal location for effective training. Part of this has to give language teachers the confidence in what many are already doing brilliantly: meaning making as a mediation between different languages and cultures, in negotiated (online or hybrid) learning spaces, enhanced but also refracted or "disrupted" by digital technologies.

To be able to keep their unique position of mediators (in-)between languages, cultures, worldviews and communication spaces which are now virtual as well as physical, and to fulfil their role of supporting learners to successfully negotiate

¹ "Training" here, and elsewhere in the article is used as a catch-all term, attempting to encompass the multiple forms and formats of development for language teachers from education, continual professional development, in-service and pre-service training to skills training.

meaning using multiple modes and means available to them, the training and development for language teachers needs to change at a minimum in the following ways:

- Ongoing commitment to embrace change: from a static perception of their expertise gained through pre-service training to a commitment to continuing professional development throughout their professional career.
- Taking charge of change: from only using training manuals explaining how technological tools work and might best be used in language education, to critical reflection of tools, purposes and dynamics or “cultures of use” (Thorne 2003).
- Changing what is taught: the focus needs to shift from tools, books or other “old” media to the interactions occurring with and through these tools.
- Changing what is assessed: in the light of generative AI, the process of creating and negotiating meaning between languages and cultures should become more important and more central to evaluation and assessment than the product.
- Changing how it is researched: to gain more insights into the actual experiences of online language learning, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches seems most promising (see Stickler and Hampel 2019).

Ideally, language teachers will make more explicit the epistemological work that they are already undertaking, the support they give their learners in acquiring a new worldview or understanding of meaning, truth, reality, and knowledge.

The roles of language teachers are already changing to include mediators and brokers of authentic communication opportunities, designers of learning spaces, and critical voices (see Stickler 2022; Stickler and Emke 2023a), reminding us that “[p]edagogy is a teaching and learning relationship that creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation.” (New London Group 1996, p. 60). Future roles of language teacher educators will also need to include epistemological trainers to prepare teachers and students for a world where meaning is negotiated, knowledge is constructed, and realities may well be shifting.

5 Conclusions

This paper has shown the need for a change in teacher development, in-service, as well as pre-service. It has argued for the need to move away from a belief that the language teacher is necessarily the communication “expert” in the room. It has evidenced that the transmission of expertise from the provider of knowledge (“the expert”) to the seeker of knowledge (“the student”) is a myth. What is needed instead is a shift in understanding, a deeper look into the epistemological work that online language teachers perform when they direct their learners’ attention to salient

features of the language in an online, negotiated learning space (O'Rourke and Stickler 2017; Stickler and Hampel 2019). The conceptual changes suggested transform the understanding of online language teaching as a means of facilitating the ability to make meaning in a foreign language and a foreign cultural context as well as through the mediation of digital technologies.

To support this shift in the teachers' skills, the emphasis has been on an empowerment strategy: rather than considering the structural limitations of teaching environments (the STAR structure), I have tried to bring to the foreground the potential of "wiggle room" along the three axes of teacher role, technology and authenticity. Emphasising freedom and showing that there is leeway will empower teachers in changing their engagement with continuing professional development and their understanding of the shifting epistemological affordances of online communication spaces. This strategic move in language teacher pre-service and in-service development acts as a tonic to their confidence; it assures in no uncertain terms that language teachers – in particular online language teachers – are epistemological mediators who will play an important role in the future of education. They should be confident in their skills of balancing between L1 and L2, offline and online, modes and media for communication and last, but not least, different ways of generating understanding and knowledge.

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