

## WITH OR WITHOUT YOU: THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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**Abstract:** *Several factors have affected higher education during the last few decades across the globe, as a consequence of which, teachers nowadays are facing unprecedented changes and challenges of the 21st century. Due to fast developments in technology, digital competences are of major importance today for both students and teachers. Many language teachers as well as teachers of languages for specific purposes are therefore constantly faced with the question of shall we or shall we not let digital technology into our teaching activity. There are pros and cons to integrating online Web2 technology into the curriculum, just as there to teaching with the traditional methods of offline materials, books and exercise books. Both options have their own advantages and disadvantages, however, the number of those, who focus more on how we should use digital technology in class, instead of whether we should use it at all, is on the rise. Digital tools can be used to our advantage when teaching, nevertheless, this is not an easy task as new digital resources and various apps reach us almost on a daily basis. Which one to select and implement in class that suits the students' needs and provides authentic materials for classes of languages for specific purposes, which at the same time, will not quickly seem outdated or disappear, is a constant challenge we have to face. The aim of this paper is to investigate the notion of digital education, including digital classrooms, digital students and digital teachers as well as the teaching methods of the 21st century pertaining to language classes, especially focusing on language classes for specific purposes. In authors' understanding, digital tools can be used as a potential source of stimulation from which to launch into interactive communication keeping a healthy balance between the sensory and the digital resources. Numerous educational digital tools emerge every day, which require special skills, knowledge and competence, therefore teaching with or without them cannot and should not be imposed on language teachers, instead, this decision should lie exclusively in their hands.*

**Keywords:** 21st century education; digital tools in language classes; languages for specific purposes; digital classroom; digital teacher; digital students

## 1. Introduction

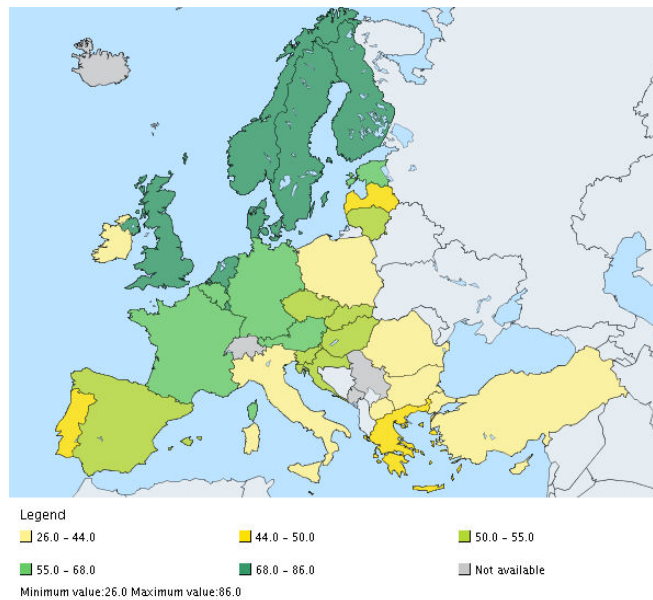
*'When the wind of change blows, some build walls, while others build windmills.'*  
Chinese proverb

The wind of change in 21st century education is that of digital technology. It goes without saying that digital competence and skills are some of the most important issues facing us today. We live in an age when many language teachers, as well as teachers of languages for specific purposes are faced with the question of shall we or shall we not let digital technology into our teaching activity. There are those (Lam and Tong, 2012; Taneja et al., 2015) who argue about the distracting influence of digital devices in the classroom claiming that

'...although technology in classroom has its benefits, many students constantly succumb to its use during class for non-class related purposes, thereby impacting their learning' (Taneja et al., 2015:141). Whereas others (Holmes, 2009; Dahlstrom et al., 2014; Nemeth and Csongor, 2016; Collins and Halverson, 2018) believe that teachers should be using web based digital resources and tools in education to serve the needs of the digital native generation. It is, indeed, a hotly debated topic, that often divides opinion. The purpose of this article is to scrutinize both sides of the argument from the perspective of students and teachers in the digital age focusing on language classes, including languages for specific purposes.

## 2. The Digital Age and the Digital Students

We live in a digital age surrounded by computers, laptops, tablets and various digital gadgets that provide us instant access to information in the blink of an eye. As Figure 1 below suggests, most of the population aged between 16 and 74 have basic or above basic digital skills in many countries of Europe. The Eurostat statistical data (2016) are based on selected activities performed by this age group on the internet in four specific areas, which are information, communication, problem solving and content creation. It is assumed that individuals having performed certain activities have the corresponding skills. EU 28 countries score an average of 55% and it was Luxembourg with the highest score (86%) and Bulgaria with the lowest (26%) in 2016, but the numbers are growing annually.



**Figure 1:** Individuals, aged 16-74, who have basic or above basic digital skills (%)  
Source: Eurostat, 2016

Hence, we can say that it is not only the young, but the older generation as well who are increasingly digitally literate nowadays. Although, there have been some suggestions earlier to make a distinction between the two generations. The term *digital native* was created by Marc Prensky (2001) to refer to those who are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, online games and the internet. They have habits and interests that are considerably different from those of the previous generations. *Digital immigrants* refer to those, who were not born into the digital world, but have been trying to catch up with the latest developments of the new technology. However, eleven years later Prensky (2012) reconsidered his definition and now promotes the use of the term *digital wisdom* and claims that the question is no longer whether *to use or not to use* technology, but rather *how to use* it to become better and wiser people.

In White's view (2008), there is a distinction between *digital residents* and *digital visitors*. In his understanding, the *residents* live their life online that supports and determines their identity and facilitates their relationships. For them the internet serves as a platform, which they use constantly, whereas the *visitors* use the web only as a tool whenever they need it. They log on and once their task is completed, they log off.

Rushkoff (1999) coined the term *screenagers* to refer to young people who have been raised on computers and other digital devices. The word has even been accepted by the Oxford English Dictionary (Screenager, n.a.): a screenager is 'a person in their teens or twenties who has an aptitude for computers and the internet'.

Gardner and Davis (2013) use the term *app-generation*, whereas Rosin (2013) created the term *touch-screen generation* referring to children who acquire media literacy at a very young age. As a result, by the time they go to school their brain

has been permanently altered by constant exposure to technology. However, as Füzési (2016) claims, they are neither better nor worse than the students of the 20th century, they are just different. They think and process information differently than previous generations. Prensky (2001) defines how they are different when he describes the specific features of this generation: they want to have random access to information and receive it as soon as possible; they are able to multi-task, dissimilar to their predecessors and have a strong desire to belong to social networks and have active personal involvement. In their learning processes, they prefer graphics to text, would rather play games than do serious work and yearn to be rewarded frequently. Therefore, in his view, the biggest problem facing education today is that the ‘...digital immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language’ (Prensky, 2001: 2). Dahlstrom et al. claim (2014:5) that ‘although technology is omnipresent in the lives of students, leveraging technology as a tool to engage students is still evolving.’ As they argue (ibid:5), ‘... students still have a complex relationship with technology; they recognize its value, but they still need guidance when it comes to using technology in meaningful and engaging ways for academics.’ As Nemeth and Csongor (2016) conclude their study, students still prefer blended learning environments, where both offline and online materials are included in the classes and this view is also supported by Dahlstrom et al. (ibid) who argue that students’ expectations are continuously increasing for these hybrid online/face-to-face experiences.

### 3. The Digital Age and the Digital Teachers

So, what should a 21st century teacher be like? Palmer (2015) investigates this notion by attempting to compare it with a 20th or 19th century teacher. Surprisingly, after searching the net and various social platforms, she did not encounter anything even near as a 20th or 19th century teacher. The only search results were all for the 21st century, like #teacher21, #21stcenturyskills, #21stCTeaching and books with titles on the 21st century teaching and learning. To conclude, she claims teaching in the 21st century is a unique phenomenon as learning before could not be accomplished the way it is happening now everywhere, all the time, on any possible topic, supporting any possible learning style or preference. She even endeavours to describe 15 characteristics she claims a teacher of the 21st century should have, which are as follows:

1. *Learner-centred classroom and personalized instructions*, which imply interactivity and high involvement of the students in the learning process as claimed similarly by Nemeth & Csongor (2016).
2. *Students as producers* suggest that today's students have the latest and greatest tools; yet, they still have to work with handouts and worksheets in class. Instead, students should be encouraged to produce blogs, movies, or any other digital media that they feel proud of and can share with others.
3. *Learn new technologies*, which infer continuous development, as the new technologies are new for the novice and experienced teachers alike, so it is never late to start.

4. *Go global* proposes that digital tools nowadays make it possible to learn about anything taking place in the world at once, to bring the world into your home in an instance.
5. *Be smart and use smart phones* implies to encourage students to use their gadgets in class for learning purposes.
6. *Blog* advocates writing blogs by both student and teacher as it has value of writing for real audience and establishes digital presence. In Palmer's view (ibid) to blog or not to blog should not be a question anymore.
7. *Go digital* means another important attribute that is to go paperless by integrating technology into class. Sharing links and offering digital discussions enables students to access and share class resources in a more organized fashion and, as an added value, this process is also environment-friendly as it saves the use of paper.
8. *Collaborate* assumes that technology allows collaboration between teachers and students. Creating digital projects together with other educators and students will make classroom activities resemble the real world.
9. *Use Twitter chat, which* suggests the cheapest and most efficient way to organize one's own professional ideas and research results and facilitates staying current with issues and updates in the field. Although, there are several other professional platforms for teachers to engage in and share their expertise and research, such as LinkedIn or ResearchGate, they all contribute to professional growth and expansion of knowledge.
10. *Connect*, which is important in keeping contact with professionals from the same field.
11. *Project-Based Learning* implies that students need guidance from their teachers when developing their own research questions, conducting their surveys and creating projects to share.
12. *Build your positive digital footprint* suggests that teachers should model how to appropriately use social media, how to produce and publish valuable content, and create sharable resources.
13. *Code* entails today's literacy, i.e., computer language.
14. *Innovate* proposes trying new ways, such as teaching with social media or replacing textbooks with web resources.
15. *Keep learning* implies that as new technology keeps emerging, learning and adapting is essential or in other words, lifelong learning is inevitable.

All these characteristics listed above suggest that teachers of the 21st century need rather different skills, competences, approaches and teaching methods in class than those of their predecessors. They also imply that these instructors play a significant role in preparing students for the 21st century, distinguished by worldwide migration, cross-cultural encounters and rapid changes in technology. Maurizio and Wilson (2004:28) even go as far as to claim that '...our nation's well-being throughout this century will be determined by how well we prepare our students today.' Therefore, intercultural and digital competences are of major importance in teaching in higher education nowadays. Nemeth (2015) and Hamburg (2016) both highlight that intercultural knowledge should be introduced into the higher education curricula in order to 'make changes at cognitive, attitudinal and competence level regarding cultural differences among people in the world' (Hamburg,2016:70). However, as Hamburg argues (ibid), it should not be

the self-imposed task of merely foreign language teachers as they might lack the necessary knowledge, attitude and skills. Likewise, the integration of digital tools into the foreign language and languages for specific purposes curricula require special skills, knowledge and competence, as well. Therefore, teaching with or without them cannot and should not be imposed on language teachers, instead, this decision should lie exclusively in their hands.

#### **4. The Digital Classroom**

Digital skills have been integrated into language classes to a greater extent for the past decade. Dudeney (2015) refers to the ability to use digital technologies effectively as digital literacy. However, the use of technology for learning is not restricted to any age groups and learners are exposed to a range of technologies from a very early age in the home. By the time they go to school, many have developed specific digital skills that enable them to participate in ICT activities in the classroom (Battro, 2004). The difference between the traditional and the blended learning curriculum, which includes both online and offline materials, is the activity and passivity level of the students. In the 20th century curriculum, teachers were creating a sequence of activities they wanted to involve the students in, whereas the activities in blended learning need to be much more engaging, involving, so the students feel some ownership of those processes and they are actively involved. Hence, we can say learning is no longer just about the delivery of educational materials, it is about interactivity with those who are learning. Nemeth and Csongor (2016) go as far as to claim that digital technology has clearly facilitated a change of dynamics in the teacher–student relationship; it makes the process mutual and shared. They assert that our role as language teachers has gone beyond ‘only’ teaching. We have to keep up-to-date with the latest technological devices and tools to serve the needs of today’s digitally literate student population. Therefore, it is not only us teaching the students, but it is a mutual, reciprocal process, students are also continuously teaching and motivating us. It is amazing to see the huge number of options digital technology can offer in the classroom. At the same time, it also encourages people to continue learning outside of it and keep developing professionally. Teachers cannot afford to overlook it, if they want to produce a quality learning experience (Nemeth & Csongor, 2016).

##### ***1.1 The Digital Classroom of Languages for Specific Purposes***

As regards teaching languages for specific purposes it is even a more complex problem. Having to teach both the language and the field specific content, teachers often face challenges in providing a professional education to supplement the course book, or offer self-access materials. They are compelled to search reliable sources for authentic language use. The web is a valuable source of information, and these materials can easily be integrated into classroom methodology (Kern, 2013). However, as Tevdovska argues (2018) the selection of authentic materials should take into account several factors, such as the target group’s language proficiency skills, as well as potential difficulties that students or individual language learners might encounter during the exercises. Therefore, she suggests that the integration of authentic materials into the curriculum is essential; however,

those need to be modified and tailored to the needs and requirements of the target group. As she claims ‘...the selection of materials is an ongoing process during which the materials need to be constantly renewed, upgraded, and adapted.’ (2018: 65).

Regarding languages for medical purposes Halász and Fogarasi (2018) also imply the use of authentic samples while teaching German for Medical Purposes (GMP). In their view, medical reports represent an important written genre in medical communication and they suggest that medical students studying GMP should be introduced into writing medical reports in German, using authentic samples. These samples are provided by clinical centres in Hungary as well as hospitals from different federal states of Germany and Austria, however authentic medical reports are also available on the internet to be downloaded and integrated into classes to serve the benefit of both students and teachers.

In his study, El-Sakran (2018) also highlights the importance of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which has been taking over face-to-face communication. In his view (2018:19), ‘...this has created an essential need for students to learn efficient and appropriate communication styles pertinent to communication via emails.’ His study implies the development of the necessary skills for students studying any communication courses to write appropriate and effective professional email messages.

As Ruggiero and Hill claim (2016), cross-cultural knowledge, speaking foreign languages and digital literacy are indispensable skills in today’s world. In their view, technology is especially useful in providing a platform for collaboration online. There are several educational digital tools and applications to facilitate this process. One such tool is called telecollaboration, or virtual exchange, which uses Web 2.0 technologies to connect students studying foreign languages in different countries. Its primary goal is the improvement of foreign language skills, as well as developing intercultural competence (Furstenberg et al. 2001:56–57). Another benefit of telecollaborative projects is that they target non-mobile students by establishing the virtual mobility of this group, as argued by Németh and Csongor (2018), while at the same time facilitate the development of both their foreign language and languages for specific purposes proficiency.

## 5. Conclusion

There has been a change over the last few decades from *whether we should* use digital technology in class at all to *how we should* use them. If we really want our education systems to prepare students for tomorrow’s digital world, we should worry less about formats and instead focus on *what to teach* and *what not to teach*. Digital tools can be used to our advantage when teaching. However, this is not an easy task as new digital resources and various apps emerge almost on a daily basis. Which one to select and implement in class that suits the students’ needs, which at the same time, will not quickly seem outdated or disappear, is a constant challenge we have to face. However, teaching students how to communicate in the real world with their mouths, ears, faces, eyes and bodies is just as important. In authors’ understanding, digital tools could be used as a potential source of stimulation from which to launch into interactive communication keeping a healthy balance between the sensory and the digital resources.

As the wind of change blows, numerous digital technologies emerge. Teaching with or without them and to decide whether to build walls or windmills, as the Chinese proverb claims, lies entirely in the hands of the teachers including the teachers of languages for specific purposes.

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