

Digipedagogy in Finnish Language Centres: An Overview of Teacher Attitudes and Practices Pre- and Post-Covid

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Communication and language teaching in Finnish universities is focused on developing the skills of students who will be future academic and working life experts. It does this by attempting to teach students in a multilingual, work-oriented, and collaborative environment. Whilst this situation is challenging, it also presents numerous opportunities. The digitalization of education in general, and language and communication learning, has been one of the central challenges for teachers in recent years, but at the same time has provided one of these opportunities for innovation. Pre-Covid, in higher education, digitalization was seen to carry enormous potential. For instance, Hammershøj (2019) predicted that it was only a matter of time before we could witness the emergence of the ‘Airbnb of higher education’; that is, a platform for higher education that connects the right student with the right teacher and does so accurately, instantly, and free of charge. This came to some extent to fruition with the Kivako and Kivanet¹ projects, and work continues in the form of DIGIVISIO2030 (Digivisio2030, 2022).

Yet prior to the global pandemic, the potential gains offered by digitalization in language teaching had not been matched by teacher uptake of these possibilities. One possible explanation for this could be that the technology itself was not the core of the problem, but rather it was teacher perceptions of and attitudes towards online learning and digital interaction. Moser (2016) pointed out that “the most fundamental and challenging of all the changes related to the digitalization of higher education is the way that academics relate to and interact with their students, rather than the technologies themselves” (p. 93). Zelihic (2015) further noted that online communication and interaction have been viewed with a degree of skepticism amongst teachers even though we would argue that meaningful and productive relationships can clearly be formed in an online environment. In an earlier study, Tsai and Chai (2012) found that teachers’ personal attitudes and beliefs towards digitalization may hinder the implementation of technological integration in teaching. Research in Finnish universities has also established that teachers’ attitudes and views have a significant impact on the successful usage of digital solutions in teaching (Jalkanen, 2015; Kyllönen, 2020; Niinivaara & Vaattovaara, 2018; Rytönen, 2014). The onset of the Covid pandemic has undoubtedly altered this dynamic: it necessitated overnight that teaching be done exclusively at distance using digital technology. We have since witnessed how digital teaching has now become an integral part of communication and language learning.

In this article, we investigate what we know about teacher attitudes, thoughts and beliefs towards digitalization pre- and post-Covid. We ask if this enforced change has resulted in changed

¹ <https://www.kivanet.fi/>

attitudes, consider the development of teachers' digipedagogical views and make suggestions about where we could go from here. In doing this we take advantage of several studies conducted in these areas leading up to 2020 and then again in the post-Covid environment to see just what teachers thought then and think now. By digipedagogy, we mean situations 'when the special features of digital environments and their impact on teaching planning and the learning process are taken into account' (Tampere University Teaching and Learning Centre). In our view, digipedagogy includes a pedagogical stance on online learning, distance learning and blended learning (see Siemens et al., 2015). We conclude the article by presenting suggestions that we think ought to be considered in language centre digipedagogical development both now and in the future.

Pre-Covid Teacher Attitudes Towards Digitalization and Perceived Digital Abilities

Teacher attitudes, and indeed their ability to use digital tools in teaching, have evolved over the last decade. Likewise, institutional readiness for, and investment in, digitalization in teaching has also undergone a transformation during this period. Despite considerable interest since the 1990s in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) even ten years ago, it could not be taken for granted that there was a computer in every teaching classroom. Consequently, a significant proportion of language centre teaching was still being conducted without any use of digital tools or learning platforms such as Optima, Workmates, Blackboard or later Moodle. This was in part due to the strong resistance on the part of some teachers to the use of any digital technology in teaching and in part due to university strategies still playing catch-up with the digital age in terms of provision of equipment.

This transitional period was further influenced by the arrival of the iPad in 2010, which engendered broad discussion on its applicability in an educational setting. There had been a long debate in the literature on the efficacy of what were termed 'mobile devices' (Motiwalla, 2007; Rau et al., 2008; Roschelle, 2003) and if using them in teaching gave any added value. Early research into iPad usage in the classroom focused mostly on secondary education (Rikala et al., 2013) but Nelson's (2015) small-scale survey of iPad adoption in language centre teaching can give some small insight into the situation. In 2014, teachers were first asked to complete a questionnaire on their thoughts and worries before getting the iPads, and then after they had been using them in the classroom for some time. In the initial survey it was found that although most had experience of iPads in their personal life, up to one third of the teachers had not used a tablet of any kind previously and some found learning how to use the apps, browsing techniques, and understanding the iPad 'logic' was challenging. In terms of teaching, there were several worries: these were related to how the apps could be used in a classroom setting, technical issues, lack of proper Wi-Fi connection, lack of paper copies in the transition to digital teaching and being unable to help students with any technical problems. Teachers expected students to have good iPad skills already.

Results of the second survey found that students were in fact not as fluent in tablet use as expected and only 33% were seen as being 'good'. Whilst students responded positively, it was felt that the response was not as positive as expected. Initial fears largely dissipated over time,

but lack of technical support and technical problems remained. Overall, there was a very positive response to iPad introduction to the classroom from both teachers and students. Nelson noted “There has been a clear feeling that the iPad has brought with it a huge potential and that it has already facilitated certain structural changes in the classroom. Students, it was reported, are less reliant on the teacher as the source of all knowledge and are able to search for and utilize information rapidly independently (Nelson 2015, p. 66). Echoing the findings of Rikala et al. (2013), the teachers found iPads to be a great motivational tool, but there were concerns as to their actual value in terms of enhancing learning outcomes. In an interesting footnote to this survey, in 2022 teachers in the same institution voted overwhelmingly to give up using the iPads provided by the Centre altogether in the classroom seeing them as no longer necessary as students now all have their own devices.

Further insight into teacher attitudes and abilities pre-Covid can be found in two articles: Nelson (2017) examined teacher and institutional digital literacy (DL) in language centres and Juurakko-Paavola et al. (2018) expanded the results using the same survey model to cover and compare both language centres and Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS). Both articles and the questionnaire used were founded on a pyramid model of teacher digital skills’ development (Sharpe et al., 2010) that begins with acquiring functional access to hardware and ends with achieving a digital identity.

Nelson’s (2017) survey of language centre teachers found a great deal of uncertainty amongst teachers as regards the concept and practice of digital literacy. Take-up of digital tools with the exception of computers was low, and of the teacher respondents (n=104) only 15% thought themselves to be ‘very good’ at using them. However, the majority felt that having a digital element in their teaching was essential. Teachers overwhelmingly saw digital literacy in a limited way as simply in terms of competence with digital tools. At the same time many (43%) were uncertain as to exactly what it is. Further, when asked if they thought their colleagues understood the concept of digital literacy, 65% were unsure. At an institutional level, 90% of respondents reported that they were encouraged to use technology in teaching and learning, but little work had been done on assessing teachers’ abilities (7% said yes). Significantly, only 15% indicated that digital literacy was explicitly mentioned in their curricula. The article finished by highlighting five key areas teachers felt they needed help in: core digital skills, defining digital literacy, the need for a clear pedagogical foundation for digital teaching, the need to bring it into mainstream curricula and improving basic IT skills.

The article written by Juurakko-Paavola et al. (2018) expanded the overview of teachers’ attitudes and abilities in regard to the digitalization of teaching by including all the universities of applied sciences (UAS). The aim of the article was ‘to gain an overview of teacher perspectives of digital literacy and to identify the developmental needs and challenges teachers face’ (Juurakko-Paavola et al., 2018, p. 43). The survey carried out by Nelson (2017) was replicated and distributed to all universities of applied sciences, with some additional background elements to add context. The response rate was similar to the earlier survey (n=113/600). The results were in part similar and in part divergent. Teachers had access to and used computers (almost 100%) but whilst many had access to other devices, they were not used with anything like the same regularity. Differences were seen in attitudes towards digital literacy: 66% of university language

centre (ULC) teachers had discussed it with their colleagues, whereas the figure was 90% for UAS teachers. Divergence could also be seen in uptake of DL in curricula: 46% in UAS and 33% in ULCs. The survey showed that UAS teachers had received significantly more training in digital approaches to teaching (72% in UAS to 53% in ULC teachers). When asked to evaluate their own digital skills, it was interesting to note that those who responded in English in both UAS and ULC judged their own skills to be higher than the Finnish-speaking respondents. When asked ‘can do’ questions, English respondents thought themselves to be better at instructing students in digital matters (average 4/5) compared to their Finnish speaking counterparts (average 3/5). The need for future training was the same in both UAS and ULC groups, with the highest need being expressed for pedagogical training to adapt to the use of digital technology in teaching. Overall, teachers who responded to the survey assessed their own digital skills to be good or very good (50%). However, only 20% of teachers actually answered the survey and possibly those who were already interested in this area.

The article concluded with suggestions for future developments: at an individual level that teachers gain a clearer understanding of digital literacy, improve basic IT skills, and collaborate with each other more. At an organizational level, it was seen important to increase support for teachers in just these areas to allow time and support for teachers to develop on a personal level. Teachers are responsible for their own development, but they should be clearly supported. Nationally, digital pedagogy and practice should be systematically included in curricula development. Forums for sharing best practice should be opened to facilitate this process.

This call was answered in Finland by the 2digi project² (2017–2019) that specifically addressed these issues. The project focused on answering questions that were specifically relevant at the time: what is digital literacy, and what added value does digitalization bring to teaching? It also provided a broad range of resources for language centre teachers including self-assessment questionnaires for teachers and students, a digital portfolio, advice on online ethics and safety and lesson and courses plans involving use of digital technology. It is notable that it seemed necessary at the time to attempt to convince teachers that digitalization would give them added benefits. Post-Covid, this is arguably no longer necessary, and points to the radical shift in attitudes towards digital tools in teaching and teachers’ experiences with online teaching during lockdown. The onset of Covid in spring 2020 profoundly affected teachers and teaching and in the next section we look at how the landscape changed in this period.

Covid and the Immediate Aftermath

Insight into changing teacher attitudes in a broader, pan-European sense can be gained from a new survey carried out by the Council of Europe³ in 2021 and disseminated in 2022. The survey looked at the challenges that lockdown had presented to teachers and students, to investigate the important lessons learned and to discover what factors would continue to impact teaching once

² <https://2digi.languages.fi/>

³ <https://www.ecml.at/thefutureoflanguageeducation>

the pandemic was over. The survey received 1,735 responses from language professionals in 40 different countries at all levels of the educational spectrum. The broader work of this project is currently looking at the impact of lockdowns on teaching and the changes in methodology that may be needed in the future. The survey itself gives an overview of the current state of teaching in Europe with regard to the change to a more digitalized approach. The results differ from the Finnish environment to a certain extent. A majority felt that techniques and learning tasks had changed, and that had had a negative effect on teaching. Hybrid teaching was also seen as a less effective form of teaching. Lack of supervision in testing was considered a problem and lack of face-to-face contact reduced the possibility to give feedback, whilst learner achievement in general was seen to have suffered. However, several positive aspects were mentioned. Learners became more autonomous, new digital resources were discovered, opportunities for teacher collaboration improved by using digital tools, and the use of technology saved time. As one teacher put it:

'... the transfer to online teaching has forced me to re-evaluate a lot of what I do in class and provided an opportunity for creativity which has been beneficial to me and, I hope, to learners. I have developed a new set of skills and finally taken on board the enormous potential of the internet as a resource. This is also true for the majority of my colleagues.' (ECML, 2022a, p. 16).

This matches more closely the Finnish experience. However, challenges remain for the future including the matter of inclusion and making sure that no-one is left behind, re-evaluating what should be taught and dealing with resistance to change, as another teacher wrote:

'Online teaching is far too valuable to be put back in the box. We have learnt so much and used it all to the benefit of students' progress: we can't just go back to face to face.' (ECML, 2022a, p. 18).

A Pedagogical Shift: Putting Pedagogy Ahead of the Classroom

We have seen that there are differences in teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards digitalization and in how this may have affected teaching development (e.g., testing, objectives, sufficient control and learning trajectories). These differences were highlighted in action research carried out at the University of Helsinki Language Centre (Niinivaara, 2020). The focus of this research was on enabling teachers to express their insights into how they have seen the digitalization of language teaching and the exponential increase in the use of blended learning environments. The research consisted of qualitative interview data (n=10) that aimed at giving a voice to the language teachers involved and qualitative survey data (n=48) that was collected after the first coronavirus outbreak in the Spring 2020.

Group interviews with teachers were organized and interviewees were chosen selectively: only those teachers who were known to frequently utilize digital teaching methods and course types in their pedagogical work were invited. In the interviews the teachers were encouraged to

share their insights into why and how they use digital solutions (such as digital exams, online courses, educational videos, digitally supported flipped classroom) and how they justify the usage of digital solutions pedagogically. Interestingly, instead of portraying the benefits of digitalization as added value, or something extra, the interviewees commented on how digitalization is profoundly challenging core pedagogical preconceptions.

In one example, Interviewee 6 concluded that digital elements in their teaching cannot be separated from the basic pedagogical design process. Instead, creating, building, and maintaining digital learning environments can be seen as a manifestation of their teaching.

”I see the digital learning environment as the extension of my personal way of teaching: I keep forming my digital identity” – Interviewee 6

In addition, the interviewee refers to digital competence: using digital solutions also builds up one’s digital existence.

The varying attitudes among the teachers can be reflected in the relationship and collaboration between colleagues. Interviewee 10 describes attitudes towards digitalization might complicate the pedagogical discussion:

*”I don’t discuss digitalization with my peers, but **I discuss pedagogy**. Well, if the person is super against using digital solutions, we kind of discuss pedagogy, but there are so severe and profound disagreements between us that we actually cannot discuss at all.” – Interviewee number 10*

The key elements in which the pedagogical change became visible in the interviews can be seen in the following Table (Table 1). The Table shows how the teachers who were interviewed have shaped their teaching to better match their digipedagogical aims.

Table 1

Interpreted benefits of digitally rich teaching

	Traditional classroom:	Pedagogical digitalization:
Teacher:	“Star”, “author”, “boss”	Learning guide, coach
Control:	Attendance: “Doing the time”	Documentation: “Doing the job”
Objectives:	Acquisition, static competence	Meta-skills, dynamic competence
Resource division:	According to student amount	According to student needs
Assessment:	Testing, examining	Learning assignments

Although the data is relatively limited, it shows how the digitalization of teaching is intertwined with fundamental pedagogical issues. The changes can be seen in the teacher’s role, the way learning

and interaction is made visible and even the contents of teaching. These insights were confirmed by the respondents in the survey of teachers' experiences during the first Covid outbreak.

"I've started to think more and more about what's really worth doing in contact teaching at all. [--] In the future, I want to focus more on the things where it is at its best in contact teaching: functional exercises, spontaneous ideas, and meeting students in a hurry." (Respondent 10.)

According to the results of the survey, many teachers realized that they could function better in pedagogical terms in a digital environment and were more aware of digipedagogical issues than they had given themselves credit for. One explanation for this is that even though many of them had no previous experience of giving a full online course, they had exposed themselves to the possibility of teaching one. Almost 2/3 of the respondents reportedly benefitted from previous distance teaching training when moving to distance teaching. Training, planning, and creating pedagogical solutions in digital environments in different workshops, in training sessions and during collegial discussions worked as a dry run for online teaching.

The findings of the case study in University of Helsinki Language Centre suggest that pedagogical openness and applicability further the adoption of new technologies in teaching. It is primarily pedagogical work, which is supported by technology. We can therefore draw the conclusion that the opposition between technology and pedagogy actually complicates the development of teaching. Accepting technology as a part of teacher's work can in fact contribute to effective pedagogical solutions (see e.g., Kyllönen, 2020).

Where to Now?

Finally, we would like to make a number of suggestions showing how teachers could benefit from the momentum gained in pedagogical development during the pandemic. In this discussion, it is important to consider what kind of language and communication teaching will be needed in the future. The Council of Europe survey mentioned earlier produced a set of recommendations for the future of language education in general. They stress the need for a re-thinking of our approaches to teaching. The basic principles must remain the same: learner-centered, action-oriented and affect-aware teaching should continue (ECML, 2022b, p. 2). These core principles need to be adapted, however, so that learners can be oriented to the new teaching environments with new techniques, novel ways of engagement whilst creating communities of practice for students who can act as 'social agents' (ECML, 2022b, pp. 2–3). The ECML (2022b) recommendations are focused on a number of key issues: the need to find new resources for teaching, the need to re-think approaches to assessment for the digital age, the need to develop digital literacy skills and provide continuous support for teachers and students alike.

Developing learning environments requires renegotiation of and new approaches to language acquisition, teacher collegiality, assessment and the connection between professional skills and tertiary education. The future calls for solutions to bridge the gap between university strat-

egies and teaching reality as well as the gaps that might occur between teachers. In addition, the most prominent setting for pedagogical design can no longer be “classroom first”. In the future, language and communication learning and the learning environments used should mirror professional and everyday settings: by nature, hybrid, constantly evolving, both synchronous and asynchronous and multilingual. Novel approaches to language teaching methods should become a part of every teacher’s competence. For instance, according to Tumelius (2022), skillful management of complex, pedagogical events in hybrid spaces requires new and collaborative ways of working from teachers.

In this article we have briefly discussed the pedagogical changes that have occurred in language and communication learning in tertiary education before, during and after Covid pandemic. Finally, we offer suggestions to help teachers. Firstly, we suggest teachers take advantage of the latest work coming out of the 2digi2 project⁴ which concentrates on the key elements of digital teaching: learning objectives, generic skills, special needs and relationship building in a digital environment. The results of this project will be ready by the end of 2023. Secondly, we present three suggestions that we hope will be considered in digipedagogical development now and in the future for teachers and institutions.

Accept constant technological change and “enjoy the ride”. Technical solutions constantly evolve in all areas of life. Programs and applications develop or go out-of-date relatively rapidly, much faster than pedagogical understanding and practice. Therefore, teaching in a digital environment cannot be bound to a certain tool or a solution indefinitely. On the one hand, pedagogical aims should be solid and dynamic enough to be adapted to various digital tools and environments. On the other hand, the selection of contemporary digital solutions should be fully utilized, despite the knowledge that they will possibly need to be replaced with new ones in the future.

Develop digipedagogical competence and support variety. The development of teaching requires constant development as a teacher. This perspective should be embraced rather than dreaded. Development requires updating one’s own competence and allowing for differences in colleagues’ ways of teaching. The pandemic has taught us that new ways of teaching can be adopted surprisingly quickly by professional pedagogues. In addition, a variety of ways of learning call for a variety of ways of teaching. Pedagogical discussions between colleagues should be open and allow for variations in teaching.

Be proactive rather than reactive. The core motivation for the development of language and communication teaching should not only be reacting to global changes but contributing to the language and communication environment of the future. Language and communication teachers play a crucial role in equipping students for their professional lives. Pedagogical decisions and learning objectives can have a significant impact on how future employees act in a digitally rich working life where communication between people takes place. As language centre teachers, we need to be increasingly aware of the world and the working environment into which our students go once leaving their studies behind.

We have seen in this short article that much has happened in the last decade in relation to the

⁴ <https://2digi.languages.fi/2digi2/>

digitalization of teaching in Finnish language centres. The changes were greatly accelerated by lockdowns caused by Covid, resulting in a previously unimaginable landscape of distance, blended and hybrid teaching. The evidence that has so far been collected seems to point to the fact that there is no going back to the pre-pandemic focus on the classroom as the main place where teaching takes place. We hope our suggestions will help teachers navigate this new reality.

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