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THE “TERRA COGNITA” OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY: WHAT EDUCATORS CAN AND SHOULD DO TODAY

Second Language Teaching in the Digital Era: Perspectives and Practices / editor by E. Chaika. — Cambridge : Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. — 193 p.

The article presents a review of a collective monograph published in the English language by one of the leading publishing houses abroad and dedicated to the problems of teaching foreign languages in conditions of the introduction of various information and communication technologies in education. The author briefly reviews the content of all the research works paying attention to particular elements of research methodologies and attempts at analyzing the quality of their approaches and their practical value for the process of foreign language training both in our country and abroad. An important aspect of the material is the fact that the monograph contains the research conducted by a leading educator working at the Professional Foreign Language Training chair of Baranovichi State University.

Key words: monograph; foreign language training; educational technology; digitalization; hybrid learning; teaching approach.

Ref.: 7 titles.

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TERRA COGNITA ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫХ ТЕХНОЛОГИЙ: О ТОМ, ЧТО ПЕДАГОГИ МОГУТ И ДОЛЖНЫ ЗНАТЬ СЕГОДНЯ

Обучение второму языку в эру цифровых технологий: перспективы и практики / под редакцией Е. Чайки. — Кембридж : Научное издание Кембриджа, 2022. — 193 с.

В статье представлена рецензия на коллективную монографию, изданную на английском языке в одном из ведущих зарубежных издательств и посвященную проблемам обучения иностранным языкам в условиях внедрения в образовательный процесс различных информационно-коммуникационных технологий. В рецензии представлено краткое содержание всех опубликованных в ней материалов с описанием отдельных элементов методологии авторских исследований. Сделана попытка провести качественный анализ представленных подходов, определить степень их практической значимости для решения актуальных задач иноязычного образования в нашей стране и за рубежом. Важным моментом является то, что в монографии представлено исследование ведущего преподавателя кафедры профессиональной иноязычной подготовки учреждения образования «Барановичский государственный университет».

Ключевые слова: монография; иноязычная подготовка; педагогическая технология; цифровизация; гибридное обучение; подход к обучению.

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Introduction. The present paper aims at reviewing the recently published collective monograph *Second Language Teaching in the Digital Era: Perspectives and Practices* (2022) [1]. The 193-page book contains ten chapters written by experts working in different countries — the UK, France, Germany, Norway, Latvia, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan, and India.

The title of the monograph emphasizes the “technological” shift taking place today in the global educational landscape. The shift was caused by the large-scale adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) at all levels of educational systems. The reviewed material serves as one more proof that this process occurs universally. In every corner of the world, contemporary educators are becoming well-versed in modern software, online tutoring, and multiple other forms of computer-assisted teaching. So, all the contributors to the book represent those in the international community of teachers who are searching for most effective ways and means of implementing ICTs in the classroom. Their findings and observations contained in this volume testify to the fact that the digital revolution is gaining momentum, so educators elsewhere need to be prepared to face multiple technology-bound challenges.

Given the diversity of the authors’ backgrounds, it is not surprising that the array of questions discussed in the volume is really vast. Student (and teacher) audiences of today vary in terms of their level of readiness to use ICTs, as the digital divide between countries (and within countries) is still not a thing of the past. Language training itself, the area of primary interest for most authors, is also a multi-faceted phenomenon. Such diversity calls for the implementation of level-specific and/or subject-specific approaches to dealing with ICTs, which makes it harder to single out shared trends and tendencies across countries and educational systems.

Materials and methods of research. The examples showing the volume’s diversified content can be multiplied easily. That’s why a straightforward question arises at this point that needs to be addressed: What are the most valuable takeaways for a motivated educator who attempts to thoroughly read this volume? The present writer will attempt to answer this question applying the critical analysis approach dividing all the research papers into three major categories dealing with cross-cultural perspectives on education, the effects of the global pandemic on education, and the examples of how teaching can be done in the digital era.

Research results and discussion. Five out of ten chapters of the book discuss matters related to educational practices occurring in the post-Soviet countries. An assiduous student of cross-cultural education will find here detailed diachronic and synchronic outlines of the dynamics of change in higher education of three countries — Uzbekistan, Ukraine and Russia.

Cross-cultural perspectives on education. *Dmitriy Kiselyov* and *Luiza Muzafarova* from Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages in Uzbekistan present the evolution of the national educational system starting as early as the 15th century, when the first university was founded in their homeland. The author focus on the period that began right after the country gained independence in 1991, paying special attention to the crucial changes in the methodology of teaching foreign languages that occurred largely due to the introduction of new digital tools and the ever-growing reliance on the tenets of the communicative approach.

Tetyana Mironenko and *Lesia Dobrovolska* from the Sukhomlinskyi National University in Mikolaiv, Ukraine elaborate on the introduction of hybrid learning modes in the national higher education system. The authors distinguish between two approaches to hybrid learning that consist in either a blended version of distance and face-to-face mode or a version embracing traditional classroom reality “augmented” by means of applying new technological instruments. The Ukrainian scholars reiterate that the most optimal format for conducting classes involves using PowerPoint presentations, defending projects, holding debates and discussions, as well as making good use of online learning platform capabilities.

Elena Chaika and *Olga Meshcheriakova* working respectively at Voronezh State University and Penza State Pedagogical University in Russia underline the fact that profound changes have taken place lately in their country's system of foreign language teacher training. These changes include the growth of the institutional network (some 250 universities offer profession-oriented programs), the shortening of the duration of study (4 years at present compared with 5, not long ago), the increasing attractiveness of master's degree programs in the field that allow graduates to find employment with a wider range of educational institutions. One specific aspect of the transformation process is the increasingly crucial role played by ICTs. The authors point out the importance of a specific Master's program aimed at bridging the gap between "generations" of learning materials, i. e. those designed for face-to-face formats and for remote teaching scenarios. The authors also demonstrate a good measure of strict objectivity making "one honest remark" about the undeniable interactional advantages that face-to-face teaching format possesses.

The effects of the global pandemic on education. Another notable dimension of the book is the emphasis on the effects produced by the Covid-19 pandemic, a global calamity of unprecedented proportions. It left very little time, if any at all, for strategic planning or operational deliberation, and drastic measures had to be taken across the globe. The scale and magnitude of the transformations prove that it is not an exaggeration to posit that the pandemic politics will be the object of research for scholars across multiple disciplines for years and years to come. Many authors agree that the creation of crisis-driven teaching/learning environments may have become the biggest educational technology experiment in history [2; 3].

Yet the experiment couldn't but produce "the thousand natural shocks" to educational systems. Referring to those, international research reported that a significant proportion of students encountered serious challenges in their learning [4]. It was more of a problem in the countries with less reliable ICT infrastructure and internet access. Many students pointed out their academic performance had changed for the worse since on-site classes were cancelled. The present writer, in collaboration with Ukrainian colleagues, tried to point out the "revolutionizing" effects of the pandemic on education [5—7].

Many findings related to the effects of the pandemic are contained in the reviewed material. The contributors to the book were among the pioneers who reacted promptly trying to adapt to dramatic changes. One compelling example comes from Belarus, a country in which actual nationwide lockdown never took place, and educators had to proceed to do business as usual — but in the online mode.

The Belarus-based educator *Iryna Piniuta* started doing her research after just a month-long period of teaching "in the new normal", i. e. in conditions of the pandemic (May 2020). The researcher developed an original approach to evaluating students' and teachers' reflective opinions on intrapersonal, temporal, and interpersonal agency, on various aspects of cognitive engagement, and, last but not least, learner satisfaction. What makes the results more valuable is the fact that the research was conducted while teaching an original course to third-year students at a Belarus-based regional university ($n = 140$). The teaching activities relied heavily on the practical application of ICTs, especially online-based applications such as Padlet, Meeting Words, etc. The author provides impressive statistical data and exemplifies a wealth of classroom activities of the trans-disciplinary character. Further research into this problem seems quite promising.

The French educator *Odile Blanvillain* from the University of Caen Normandy describes how the pandemic affected learning outcomes as the university had to switch over from face-to-face to distance learning mode (September 2020). Two different audiences responded to a questionnaire designed by the researcher, which gave an opportunity to make valuable conclusions. One of them is that technological tools used in online teaching are never neutral and are a factor in shaping teacher — student interactions.

The author makes another worthy observation about online course design maintaining that such courses should contain videoconferencing options by default. According to the author, it is especially true about regular student audiences aged 17—23 years. One other finding of importance is that effective course content development is critical for distance learning success. It seems that it is not enough just to amass a large online-based portfolio of various materials; students would require to possess more navigational tools at their disposal and to be provided with tips on what information is more important to process and why.

A similar case of a prompt transition from traditional to remote teaching is presented by *Anne Prunet* from the University of Caen Normandy and *Nelly Foucher Stenklov* from Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway. The authors managed to take advantage of the unique situation — in fact, three “learning situations” — created by the intrusion of the pandemic into the regular course of events (March 2020 — June 2021). The analysis conducted during the research makes it possible to establish the existence of a gap between the “pedagogical” and “social” dimensions of the face-to-face and digital modes of operation. That, indeed, is the authors’ most significant finding, which leads the reader to the discovery of the pressing need to switch over to a more constructivist approach in teaching, especially when teaching in the online mode.

Moreover, the authors stress the need to compensate for the obvious shortcomings of the digital mode of teaching by means of more effective application of the entire array of technological tools. The authors also give practical recommendations for teachers, which are particularly applicable to higher education. One recommendation deals with creating COPs — communities of practice, i. e. groups of educators who share a genuine concern for what they do professionally. Such COPs should make themselves “visible” to student audiences, which can strengthen social presence while teaching remotely. Another recommendation deals with the importance of creating “an intercultural digital space” [1, p. 136] shared by both teachers and students that can serve as an open forum for communication. Last but not least, the authors also suggest that personal support should be provided.

Examples of how teaching can be done. Much of the book’s value lies in the descriptions of several practical applications of technology-related ideas in a variety of educational formats. By far, the best example is provided by the British authors *Sue Garton* and *Nur Kurtoglu-Hooton* from Aston University in Birmingham. The authors present a teaching scenario based on the TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) and SAMR (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) frameworks that are integrated into the process of training language teachers taking Master’s TESOL courses. The described module deals with the use of technology in teaching and learning, and students “are invited to reflect on connections between technological tools, pedagogical practice and content knowledge as they design and evaluate classroom materials” [1, p. 45].

In the opinion of the reviewer, this chapter may be the one that gives readers the best opportunity to look deeper into the process of teaching and learning. It is so because the authors add two vignettes from their student teachers to their text. The reader can follow in the steps of these student teachers as they design and then conduct their classroom activities that involve the creation of a PowerPoint animation video and/or a Glogster-based product.

The German educator *Thomas Raith* from Freiburg University of Education writes about telecollaboration, a well-established format of using present-day technological tools. However, the originality of the approach lies in the fact that the participants of the research are not only university students, which usually is the case, but primary school students ($n = 28$). What makes the results convincing is the use of an elaborate mixed methods approach (online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, discourse/content analysis). The conclusions show clearly that the introduction of the soft toy named Paddy and making it a permanent companion for the young learners of English serves as a key factor in motivating students to use the target language (e. g. keeping an online blog, etc.). It can be one more proof that modern technology can easily bring geographically distant student audiences together. On a more critical note, though, one should add that the other “partner” in this project — the university student cohort — receives little mention in the chapter.

Valentina Rudneva who works at the Jauniba youth center located in the city of Daugavpils, Latvia shares the description of the center's multiple activities. Interestingly, the center operates in a mixed linguistic environment in which young children speak Latvian, Russian, and English. Some of the youngsters "can be more technically advanced than adults" [1, p. 165], which presents a challenge for the educators making it necessary to update their skills on a regular basis.

Another case of the digital divide is presented by *Ankit Kumar Tiwari* from Vrindavan, India. The author's research results demonstrate clearly that e-learning, indispensable today in language education, is still a phenomenon that many Indian students treat as a novel experience [1, p. 178]. At the same time, focusing on teaching the Hindi language, the author maintains that the process of teaching is facilitated globally by making good use of various online platforms.

However, the "mother—child" approach put forward by the author does not look convincing enough. On the one hand, the approach seems to have stemmed from the well-known theories developed by Noam Chomsky and Stephen Krashen. On the other hand, the one-on-one sessions via Skype proposed by the author can hardly be viewed as a cost-effective way of organizing language training, especially if preceded by sessions of rote learning, translation, and drilling. The author's original background in Mechanical Engineering clearly tells upon his "mechanistic" view on language acquisition.

However, it is this author who supports his argumentation with a notable quote by a well-known Western methodologist. Back in 1985, J. C. Richards stressed the need to focus on the development of specific linguistic skills and abilities when validating exercises and teaching activities [1, p. 174]. The present reviewer fully agrees with this idea, which leads us to the final section of the review dealing with what we consider to be the less impressive aspects of the material.

What educators can and should do better. It is not surprising that the book's strengths can also turn into certain weaknesses. Using modern technological tools is a *sine qua non* for contemporary language education. The variety of tools is nothing but amazing, but simply amassing the examples of how-to's will add little if anything to our understanding of their impact on the development of specific linguistic skills and abilities, to quote J. C. Richards. At present, the community of educators would rather be presented with concrete, level- and subject-specific data displaying the measure of the above impact — in speaking, reading, listening comprehension and/or writing. However, the authors of the book chiefly focus on the data reflecting student satisfaction and such, not on how their language skills develop. More often than not, authors just pay lip service to the importance of technology [1, p. 93].

Of course, one should not be overcritical here. The book's title suggests that the main aim should be to describe a variety of approaches to foreign language teacher training per se. If so, the focus of the development of linguistic skills might obviously become a secondary matter. But one word of caution can still be shared. Let us briefly look at the descriptions of student teacher activities [1, p. 47—56]. It is clear that they are well-grounded in the theory of using technology. And yet, when one reads this text, one can't help feeling that the application of brand new online tools is becoming an end in itself. The student teachers seem to devote too much time to making applications work, whereas the final language output is a mere three (sic!) sentences employing the Past Simple. However, it is the grammatical structure that is the objective of this class, not the ability to add videos and animation to your digitalized poster.

The other example may look even less convincing from the perspective of foreign language methodology. A student teacher presents an activity aimed at 11—12-year-olds in which the focus is on the technological aspects of producing a video, but the aspect of language training (English adjectives) is somewhat overlooked. In the meantime, experienced practitioners know that educational "safety" is not in tool numbers but in methodology. The British authors prefer to share no comment on the methodology-related aspects of the activity, which might lead to some wrong assumptions on the part of the reader.

Conclusion. The volume entitled *Second Language Teaching in the Digital Era: Perspectives and Practices* should be read attentively. It contains a good number of reflective passages (for instance, p. 130—133). The experiences of the contributors serve as guidelines educators can duly follow. It becomes evident that the teachers of today are supposed to be able to find their own “islands in the stream” of digitalized information and create certain learning hubs there — a kind of level- and subject-specific spaces where their students can feel at home.

One should thank the editor of the book, *Dr. Elena Chaika*, for the job well done. The publications of such caliber serve multiple purposes, one of which being the attempt to build bridges between the pedagogical practices grounded in various cultural environments, scientific theories, etc. Such newly built bridges can and will facilitate the creation of new avenues for international collaboration in the field of language education.

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