

REVIEW OF *INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY*

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

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Inclusive Language Education and Digital Technology



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NEW PERSPECTIVES
ON
LANGUAGE & EDUCATION

Review by **Dustin Crowther**, Michigan State University

As discussed by both the editors of and the contributors to *Inclusive Education and Digital Technologies*, ongoing globalization has increased the necessity for people to be able to function using multiple languages. The value of such knowledge can be tied directly to what Bourdieu (1991) has referred to as *linguistic capital*, in which the possession of certain languages provides speakers with greater economic and social opportunities. However, the extent of language education is rarely consistent across all contexts, with certain learners often being privileged over others. In their volume, Vilar Beltrán, Abbott, and Jones (the editors) place a focus on one specific group of learners, those with special educational needs (SEN), while at the same time promoting the value of information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool for inclusive language education for all. Throughout the volume, the editors provide a range of highly interesting and relevant viewpoints on SEN, ICT, and the learning of modern foreign languages (MFL).

From the outset, the editors specifically target an audience with a vested interest in how SEN and digital technologies can impact MFL teaching and learning, though acknowledging the European-centric nature of the volume as whole. Following a brief introduction from the editors, the volume is divided into two parts: “The Key Issues” and “Case Studies.” Part 1 consists of three chapters in which three different authors—Jones, Abbott, and Wilson—attempt to identify and draw out three key issues: inclusive education, languages, and digital technologies. They subsequently show how these three constructs are “inextricably interwoven” (p. xii). Part 2 includes a series of six case studies from six different sets of authors that highlight a range of cultural contexts in which current and emerging MFL practices occur. While the intent of the editors would appear to be to use Part 2 as a way to reinforce the arguments in Part 1, there is at times a disconnect between how the three key constructs identified (SEN, ICT, MFL) are used both within and across the two parts. Despite this limitation, it is important to first note the value that exists within each individual chapter, specifically those included as case studies.

As already stated, Part 1 places a focus on key issues related to SEN, ICT, and MFL. Chapter 1 sets the stage for the rest of the volume. Jones first provides an overview of important policy changes in the United Kingdom (UK) regarding inclusivity in the MFL classroom. She then transitions into an overview of common contemporary foreign language classroom practices, specifically indicating how communicative language teaching has “perhaps unintended consequences of ‘closing down’ options once again in marginalising reading and writing, especially for learners with SEN” (p. 9). This leads the author to highlight the importance of the learning community, learner personalization, and formative assessment in developing the MFL classroom. Though briefly discussing the role of ICT in her conclusion, Jones leaves the larger discussion of ICT to Abbott in Chapter 2. While Jones placed a focus on SEN in MFL, Abbott focuses solely on the usage and potential benefits of ICT in the MFL classroom. First, Abbott provides a brief history of ICT in language learning, with a particular focus on how ICT can be used to practice, assist, and enable MFL learners. Second, he discusses the importance of making ICT available to all learners. Last, he argues the need for teachers to “have a nuanced and rich understanding of the affordances of the technology” (p. 42). In Chapter 3, Wilson brings Jones’s focus on SEN and Abbott’s focus on ICT together, with six lessons that (a) identify a need to consider best practices both over history and across contexts; (b) recognize the need to not only be able to identify and assess SENs, but also to differentiate between such learners; and (c) highlight the need to both observe and verify potential learning gains and also to research instances in which expected gains do not occur. Despite occurring near the beginning of his chapter, the key take away from Wilson’s view would be that in regards to learners with SENs, the primary concern of MFL teachers should be “the welfare of their human charges, not how cutting-edge their choice of computer hardware or software might be” (p. 46). This statement furthers Abbott’s previous argument that teachers need a rich understanding of how ICT can be applied to the MFL classroom.

With Part 1 having established the overall focus of the volume, Part 2 moves to demonstrate the intersect of SEN and ICT across multiple MFL classrooms, located primarily in the United Kingdom (3 studies). Evidence is also provided from Austria, Spain, and Poland (1 study each). While obvious value exists in placing a specific focus on both the MFL teacher (Chapters 4 and 6) and the creation of SEN-targeted activities (Chapter 8), the true strength of the volume is found in the three chapters that target learners with specific SENs: hearing impairment, visual impairment, and dyslexia. Domagała-Zyśk (Chapter 5) focuses on learners with different degrees of hearing impairment, demonstrating how “technology serves as a tool to enhance education and to promote socialization of D/deaf and hard of hearing students” (p. 88). When incorporating computer-based technology (such as the Internet) for such learners, several key considerations are provided, related to material preparation, software selection, and learner needs. Just as importantly, Domagała-Zyśk stresses the necessity of teamwork between deaf learners, teachers, support assistants, and others in remaining up to date on the tools available for such learners. Crombie (Chapter 7) discusses dyslexia, providing an overview of potential ICT applicable to learners with such impairments. She also highlights the struggle between cost and benefit, stating that the “main disadvantage of technology...is that the hardware is generally quite expensive...the costs of assistive technology as it applies to dyslexic learners may well match the equivalent costs of books” (p. 131). A further concern raised by Crombie is the significance of the social plane in making learning meaningful, an area of difficulty for learners with dyslexia, and how technology must be considered as an aid in attaining meaningful learning, but not as a solution to all an instructor’s dilemmas. The final chapter by Jeitler & Wassermann (Chapter 9) addresses learners with different levels of visual impairments, providing a list of potential solutions to the difficulty of accessing written sources. A key point raised is the need to consider two types of support: one through the school and another through personal assistance. Discussing good practice, the authors highlight a need for open communication between learners with SENs and their intended academic institutions before beginning their studies.

In Chapter 4, Vilar Beltrán and Sales Ciges argue for the SEN-pedagogical virtues of digital technologies,

which include material creation, content presentation, and accessibility. In reference to teacher education, Meiring and Norman (Chapter 6) argue that there are two major challenges: “meeting the needs of all learners and...improving/enabling the learning experience” (p. 108). In referencing the relationship between these two challenges, Connor (Chapter 8) states the need that an “abiding principle...must always be that of assessing how far a particular tool can enhance an existing and effective pedagogy” (p. 153). While all the above authors recognize the potential benefits of ICT in the classroom, they also indicate that such benefits are a direct result of appropriate implementation of such technology.

There is little doubt that the contributions of both Part 1 and Part 2 provide valuable insights into how ICT can help improve the teaching of MFL to learners with SENs. Key themes that consistently arise include (a) the necessity to recognize the various needs of learners with different types of SENs, and subsequent pedagogical adjustments to account for these needs; (b) the importance of educating MFL teachers on both SENs and available ICT; and (c) the importance of providing learners with SEN support from multiple levels (i.e., fellow learners, teachers, administrators). Despite these strengths, there are several means in which the overall message could have been reinforced. One potential consideration that could have added valuable insight is broader reference to second language acquisition (SLA) literature. By drawing direct links between SLA research (see VanPatten & Williams, 2015 for a recent overview of existing SLA theories) and how the integration of ICT in MFL classrooms aids learners with SENs, the editors, as well as the authors, could have provided a sounder theoretical base for their collective work. Beyond the potential addition of a theoretical framework for learning, there is also some inconsistency in how SENs and ICT are treated. Despite several chapters stressing the importance of differentiating between learners with different types of SENs (see Chapters 3, 5, 7, and 9), others propose usages of ICT in the MFL classroom without any type of differentiation (see Chapters 4 and 8). This leaves open a question of whether members of the volume’s target audience (teachers, advisors, and researchers) should focus on individualized approaches towards aiding learners with SENs, or take a more generalized approach. The result of this split in focus subsequently manifests itself in the types of ICT discussed. Authors of chapters addressing learners with specific SENs discuss the usage and benefits of more specialized ICT (i.e., brands of hearing aids for deaf learners), where those with a more general focus on SENs reflect a similar focus for the ICT discussed (i.e., Web 2.0 tools, social media). Considering that educating MFL teachers on the benefits of ICT in language teaching is a key theme of this volume, it might have been helpful if the editors had clarified whether they were promoting a SEN-specific or SEN-general approach towards education.

Though at times the overall impact of the volume is limited due to a lack of cohesion between contributors, specific chapters, such as Chapter 5, Chapter 9, and Chapter 7, provide a substantial analysis of specific SENs within the MFL classroom and how such SENs may be addressed. Such analyses will be of great benefit to MFL instructors at various educational levels (e.g., high school, university). Vilar Beltrán, Abbott, and Jones have brought attention to an important area of language learning and teaching in *Inclusive Language Education and Digital Technologies*, providing examples from a range of locales across Europe. Through their work, it has become clear that from top to bottom (e.g., administrators, teachers, personal assistants), there is a lack of focus in how SENs are treated in the MFL classroom, and that a potential solution exists through the use of ICT. Their volume is an initial step in bringing clarity to this area, and they show how specific SENs can serve as a strong target for future work.

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Dustin is a PhD student at Michigan State University with a focus on Second Language Studies. He previously completed his MA in Applied Linguistics at Concordia University in Montréal, Canada. His primary research interests include the perception of nonnative speech by both native and nonnative

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