Language Teaching across the Digital Divide

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Abstract. This paper is an exploration of the reflexive relationships between language teaching, social justice and online networking. The overlapping objectives among these three pursuits are considered in the argument for the use of videoconferencing technology in virtual language classrooms for the purpose of revitalizing fossilized languages (in diasporic communities) and endangered languages (in aboriginal communities). The virtual classroom allows for a levelling of the playing field in that the absence of a shared physical space can potentially reduce the weight of cultural and linguistic hegemony. The capacity of the internet to overcome challenges of time and distance means that language speakers and learners in disparate locations can meet in real time to ensure a language's survival.

Keywords: Second language instruction, CALL, Virtual Classrooms, Language Loss.

1 Introduction: Language Attrition and the Power Struggle

There is no shortage of research demonstrating that when two cultures make contact through either migration or expansionism, there will be rapid mother-tongue shift to the dominant language especially when there are assimilationist policies or socio-economic incentives in place to discourage the use of the minority language (Paulston, 1994; Garcia and Diaz, 1992; Conklin & Lourie, 1983). While researchers have identified some factors which help to slow down the process of language shift, the mother tongues of diasporic and aboriginal communities around the world are in jeopardy of being replaced by the language of the dominant culture in each context (L2).

The relationship between power and the status of a language was expressed most concisely by Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich when he described a language as "a dialect with an army and a navy"[1]. This description aptly encompasses the process by which one linguistic variety becomes the official or standard language within a nation, as well as the process by which indigenous languages are essentialized and rendered invisible save for their exotic appeal as names of cities, regions or bodies of water. The army and navy serve as modern day metaphors for the might a language wields when it is the one in which education, commerce, governance, law and health care are

[1] Not all scholars attribute the coining of this phrase to Weinreich. While various other names have been proposed, such as Joshua Fishman, there remains no clear originator of this popular and oft-quoted saying.

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conducted. As Heller (1987) explains, membership in a group entitles one to participate in social networks and have access to roles and resources controlled by that group. Such membership, more often than not, requires native-like linguistic and cultural proficiency. Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) describes language as "the DNA of culture", and Bruner (1990) argues that the power of a culture's account of itself to shape human mental functioning and human lives to its requirements should not be underestimated.

2 Computer Assisted Language Learning: A Brief History

Most of the early CALL research such as that of Freed (1971) and Chapelle & Jamieson (1986) focussed on the benefits of computer based language courseware (such as PLATO or PUNCT) and appeared to indicate that students were unsatisfied with the minimal amount of control or autonomy they had within the courseware (which consisted at that time of grammar, punctuation and vocabulary drills.).

Kern and Warschauer (2000) describe the second generation of CALL (the 1980s and 1990s) as a move towards a constructivist perspective with the development of CD-ROM technology and commercially available software that allowed the learner to move about in a simulated environment with video, sound, graphics and text.

With globalization came the awareness of the potential of simulated environments for teaching target language proficiency to low skilled workers in the tourism industry (waiters and taxi drivers working at tourist spots popular with Western travellers) or in out-sourced labour (corporate America's use of call centres in developing nations). E-Client was one program that sought to fill the niche.

The new millennium and the creation of Web 2.0 introduced the shift away from the learner's interaction with the computer to the learner's interaction with teachers and other learners via computer based networks. Social networking, chat rooms, learning management systems, podcasts, webinars and videoconferencing paved the way for online synchronous language teaching or synchronous Network Based Language Teaching (NBLT), as Warschauer and Kern (2000) refer to it.

Social networking sites and videoconferencing applications enabled would-be language learners to set up their own cyber interactions with native speakers on their own terms, for their own reasons and at their convenience. Innovative programs such as LingQ began to emerge which offered hybrid experiences for the language learner, whereby they could study online lessons on their own time and then interact with a personal tutor using free internet telephony. A quick browse of Facebook groups demonstrates the extent to which individuals are initiating reciprocal language learning and teaching communities through applications such as Skype.

For many, videoconferencing technology has come to be seen as the next logical step in language teaching and learning since its real-time two-way video and audio transmissions allow for learning communities to interact in a synchronous environment while continuing to make use of asynchronous teacher-student communication via e-mail or group discussion board postings, if desired. Recently CALL literature has been heralding the imminent pedagogical paradigm shift which will follow the arrival of videoconferencing technology in language classrooms. Nonetheless, there has been a dearth of contributions to the discourse with respect to best practices. Wilcox suggests that "[t]he stigma of videoconferencing is that, throughout its history, next year has always been the year it was going to 'really take off'" (O'Dowd, nda).

3 Language Education and Social Justice

Language planning or engineering is the term used in the discourse to describe an organized movement whose goal it is to counter the deleterious effects of policy with respect to a given language's status, modernization, and conservation (Baker, 2001). This effort is typically rooted in a sense of urgency regarding a given language's viability. According to Baker, more than half of the world's languages are no longer being transmitted to the children of that linguistic community (p. 50). Highly coordinated and well funded efforts to revitalize an endangered language have taken place in various countries: Wales (Welsh), Ireland (Gaelic), the Basque and Catalonia regions within Spain and France (Basque and Catalan), Peru and Bolivia (Quechua), New Zealand (Maori) and Israel (Hebrew) to name a few.

The painful legacy of native residential schools which operated in Canada, Australia, and the U.S. for over a hundred years remains all-too-visible in many tragic forms. The schools were set up to 'kill the Indian in the child" by separating children from their parents in order to 'civilize' them, convert them to Christianity and replace their mother tongues with English (de Leeuw, 2009).

Scholars interested in addressing these linguistic 'crimes against humanity' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009, p.55) have conducted research which has informed government and educational policy world-wide (Haugen, 1987; Fishman 1991; Wong Fillmore, 1991; Cummins, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas 1999; Baker 2001; Osborn, 2006). Their efforts are visible in the form of sign laws, official recognition of minority languages, immersion education, heritage language classes, and mother tongue as medium-of-instruction concessions. Their efforts are affirmed in UNESCO's 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights whereby individuals are guaranteed the right to use their own languages in private and in public (Article 3-1), and host countries are prevented from forcing or inducing the replacement of original cultural characteristics with those of the host society (Article 4-2).

4 The Internet and Social Justice

Equitable access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) for developing nations was declared a priority by the United Nations in 1997 (UN Administrative Committee on Coordination, 1997). Some researchers have even suggested that a link exists between networked communication and democracy (Kedzie, 1997). At the 2003 *World Summit on the Information Society* (WSIS, 2003) held in Geneva, world leaders from 175 different nations drafted a declaration of principles which included the recognition of the power of ICT to address social inequities, oppression, environmental concerns and human suffering.

In the private sector, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have made use of the internet for a number of important causes. Industries such as transportation, finance, communication, technology and natural resources are just some of the sources of funding for online projects intended to level the playing field for disadvantaged groups.

Samasource, a non-profit organization is the 'fair trade' leader in labour outsourcing. It accomplishes its mission to reduce poverty in low-income communities around

the world by subcontracting dignified, technology-based work for a fair price to women, youth and refugees whom the organization trains at no charge.

Fire and Ice, a social responsibility initiative of Elluminate, has been behind many international partnerships between communities in developed and developing nations. The unique capacity of ICT to "reduce many traditional obstacles, especially those of time and distance, for the first time in history makes it possible to use the potential of these technologies for the benefit of millions of people in all corners of the world" (WSIS, 2003, Principle 8).

5 Online Language Learning and Social Justice

Early studies of the use of videoconferencing in language classrooms may have discouraged instructors and scholars from exploring its potential as a means of lifting language learning from the assimilationist and marketplace paradigms. Early focus on limited visual feedback, transmission delays and lack of shared workspace (Zähner, Fauverge and Wong, 2000), kept the discourse rooted in technological limitations, and left issues of social justice unexplored. In recent years, many of these and other earlier challenges have been addressed (at least in part) through more sophisticated virtual learning environments such as those in Elluminate and Adobe Connect. Improvements, such as the ability to 'raise one's hand' by clicking on an icon, provide the instructor and other students with a visual indication of who is in line to speak. The chat feature can serve as a means of providing simultaneous feedback while a classmate is speaking. Emoticon buttons such as a happy face, applauding hands or a thumbs-up also work well for simultaneously communicating with the speaker in the absence of body language and verbal cues. Whiteboards, note-taking pods and polls allow for collaboration within the whole class or in smaller break-out rooms.

A skilled language instructor can easily establish a learning community which replicates many of the key dynamics that exist in a face-to-face classroom. Knowledge is constructed and communicated via whiteboards, break out rooms, file sharing and even desktop sharing. Indeed the online virtual classroom has all the advantages of a traditional classroom as well as many more that are unique to this medium. Thus there is little if anything to discourage teachers, linguists, educational researchers and policy makers from accessing the synchronous virtual language classroom to prevent globalization from diverting our attention away from language shift and loss.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for the use of synchronous learning management systems to protect against the individual and collective loss of a language through shift or extermination. The use of videoconferencing to revitalize a fossilized language in diasporic communities or an endangered language in aboriginal communities is the obvious solution to the challenge of connecting people across time and distance. It represents, to those of us interested in social justice, a fitting use of modern technology to protect the primordial knowledge embedded in language.

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