



DIGITAL TOOLS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING: EXPLORING TEACHERS' INNOVATIVE AND ENGAGING PRACTICES

Aleksandra Gagić*,
Tijana Gajić,
Valentina Gavranović,
Neda Maenza,
Maja Veljković Michos

University Singidunum,
Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract:

This paper reports on the case study conducted with a group of secondary school language teachers and their practices of using digital tools from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak onward. It investigates which tools the respondents used when they conducted classes exclusively online, and which ones they use when organising in-person teaching. The study aims at determining whether, how and to what extent the habit of using digital tools has improved over time. Quantitative research, in the form of an online survey, was conducted at the beginning of 2023 in order to analyse teachers' overall perceptions of digital tools in language teaching and learning before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Forty-eight respondents did the online questionnaire. The findings showed that teachers held critical viewpoints on the use of technology in language teaching. The findings also suggest that teachers adopted digital technologies to address their and students' needs. Teachers reported that they found it difficult to deal with the challenges of online learning, especially regarding the lack of effective communication, staying up to date with modern technology and time-consuming administrative work. Furthermore, the results reveal that using digital tools helps students engage with the language in diverse ways, enhances their motivation to learn, develops their language learning skills, and improves their intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords:

Digital Tools, Language Teaching, Teachers' Perspective, Interactive Classroom Environment, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements have greatly influenced education policies and teaching and learning practices, providing valuable opportunities for improving the quality of education at all levels. As a result of immense changes affecting education systems worldwide, particularly enhanced after the COVID-19 outbreak, there have been numerous endeavours to reexamine the role of digital technologies in creating purposeful and effective teaching and learning.

Aiming at providing a high-quality education framework that relies on a digital environment and tools, and helping all education stakeholders tackle the digital challenges and embrace the opportunities, the EU has adopted the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) in 2020 [1]. The importance of innovating and developing new ways of teaching and

Correspondence:

Aleksandra Gagić

e-mail:

agagic@singidunum.ac.rs



learning supported by educational technologies has been emphasised in our local context as well, and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia published the Digital Competence Framework in 2019, as one of the educational policy measures regulating the application of digital technologies. The Framework focuses on developing teachers' digital competencies, and, subsequently, contributing to the development of students' digital competencies and equipping them with skills needed for living and working in a digital society [2].

The role of teachers in a technology-supported education environment is crucial, and, in order to respond effectively to the ever-growing educational demands, they need to develop their digital competencies continuously [3]. This paper reports on the case study conducted with a group of secondary school language teachers and their practices of using digital tools from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak onward. It investigates which tools the respondents used when they conducted classes exclusively online, and which ones they use when organising in-person teaching. The study aims at determining whether, how and to what extent the habit of using digital tools has improved over time.

2. TECHNOLOGY-SUPPORTED TEACHING

In recent years, our society has experienced a technological revolution due to a global sanitary phenomenon (COVID-19), which has affected all aspects of human activity. For this reason, education has been transformed in the way that the use of technology and the Internet has become a priority in all school systems. As the use of technological tools such as LMS platforms, CMI systems, and other institutional and non-institutional web-based teaching aids became an alternative or a substitute for in-site lessons and conventional face-to-face classrooms and educational centres, teachers and students have been oriented towards developing and improving their digital skills and competencies in a relatively short period. The aim was to provide a continuous and effective teaching and learning process, accessible to all participants: educators, students, and institutions. The Internet adopted the role of a multi-directional, interactive, and creative medium, suitable for both synchronous and asynchronous interaction. The technological tools used for teaching and learning in such conditions were mainly based on Web 2.0 tools. The applications and platforms provide interaction between users, utilize data from multiple sources, and offer various audio-visual

facilities to all users connected to the Internet, delivering rich user experiences [4]. Consequently, current teaching approaches and methods have been reexamined and modified to respond to new conditions. More than ever educators have been encouraged to promote a learner-centred approach and students' active engagement in their learning. Although the panacea of the best teaching model is an elusive idea, much attention has been paid to the need to constantly adapt educational practices to the dynamic social and economic changes with the aim of ensuring the quality of teaching and learning [5]. On the other hand, such changes pose numerous challenges for teachers who need to master a wide range of skills to respond to the newly created demands arising in societies. Various aspects of teachers' digital competencies have been investigated. Findings draw attention to the discrepancies between what teachers identify as needs and priorities in technology-supported lesson organisation on the one hand and, on the other, real demands and teachers' skills and competencies [6].

A considerable body of research has investigated whether teachers in the Republic of Serbia were ready for the online teaching environment, and some show that despite adequate access to technology, the respondents, primary school teachers, were not prepared to organise lessons effectively, emphasising the lack of communication with students as the greatest challenge during online teaching [7]. The research conducted by the end of 2021 points to considerable differences in using tools and platforms when conducting and organising online lessons, reporting the findings that the commonest platforms used for synchronous online teaching were Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams, while Google Classroom and Moodle were mainly used as LMS platforms [8]. As regards teachers' perception of the benefits of using digital technologies, opposing results can be found in research - some show that teachers do not express dominantly positive attitudes, prioritising traditional and face-to-face interaction [9], while others identified that the use of technology can facilitate lesson preparation, enhance students' motivation, and make teaching and learning material more accessible to everybody [10]. In research conducted with the aim of examining students' opinions on the possibilities online learning can offer, the results show that secondary students to a high extent recognise the advantages and possibilities of digital tools and platforms [11]. Based on the research conducted among students, the findings suggest that the primary benefit of integrating mobile applications in foreign language instruction is the engaging and stimulating nature of the learning experience [12].



All levels of education have experienced changes and teaching foreign languages is no exception. The updated version of CEFR (2020), which promotes an action-oriented approach, has introduced two new scales of online interaction: online conversation and discussion and goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration. Both scales involve multimodal activity, or use of the web, for spoken or written activities. From this perspective, the digital environment provides learners with valuable tools to express, participate and improve access and inclusion in society [12]. Those premises encourage learners' autonomy and digital competencies to prepare learners to interact independently in online intercultural environments. In such a context, teachers are stimulated to analyse their existing practices, change them, or adapt them to new circumstances. The institutions have adopted different learner-centred models such as blended or hybrid learning, flipped classrooms, game-based learning, and others, incorporating them into their learning management systems. These teaching methods and approaches are based on CALL, an interactive model that with the help of computer technology provides all stages of teaching: presentation, practice, and feedback, facilitating the learner's autonomy and self-paced learning [13]. Nevertheless, the primary focus on technology and online tools may raise numerous questions about their pedagogically justified application in language classrooms. The mere adoption of new technological equipment, hardware, and software by teachers and students has not provided necessarily qualitative teaching and effective learning of a target language. In other words, technological innovation does not imply pedagogical innovation [14]. Both teachers and learners, regardless of the educational and geographical context, recognise the advantages but also the challenges of the newly imposed hybrid language learning context. Recent studies show that face-to-face interaction and the role of the teacher are irreplaceable elements for effective language learning [15] and that lectures, presentations, and oral explanations given by professors are more effective than learning with the support of digital tools [16]. Some challenges are related to a lack of motivation for learning caused by inadequate learning environments or by technological issues [17]. Some of the evidence shows a lower interaction between the teacher and students in the synchronous online model of interaction, via a video-conferencing tool [18]. On the other hand, online language classes are evaluated as effective and motivating [19] and provide flexibility in time and place for learning. In other words, students have become more autonomous and responsible for their learn-

ing, both inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers need to ensure that their students, "digital natives", use their digital skills for learning purposes. Teachers and educators ought to develop and utilize multiple skills and knowledge (technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge), to understand, evaluate and create learning situations that are suitable for concrete teaching contexts and based on real students learning needs.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to determine which digital tools were used in language teaching before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as what the biggest challenges for language teachers in that period were. The research was conducted at the beginning of 2023. Quantitative research, in the form of an online survey, was conducted in order to analyse teachers' overall perceptions of digital tools in language teaching and learning before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The online questionnaire was done by forty-eight respondents. It included nine multiple-choice questions and two open-answer questions. The questionnaire was designed for this research, written in Serbian and teachers completed it anonymously and voluntarily. The respondents were forty eight secondary school language teachers from Serbia. They teach primarily English as a foreign language, but French, Russian, Norwegian, and German as well. Some of them teach Serbian. Most of the surveyed language teachers have extensive work experience. Almost 36% of them have been teaching for more than fifteen years whereas 33.3% of them have been teaching for more than twenty years. Only a small percentage of respondents have been teaching for less than five years.

The data from the questionnaire were analysed with the use of descriptive statistics.

The goal of this research is also to emphasise modern trends in teaching languages and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using digital tools in order to motivate students and decide whether or not to incorporate one or all of them into teaching curricula most effectively.

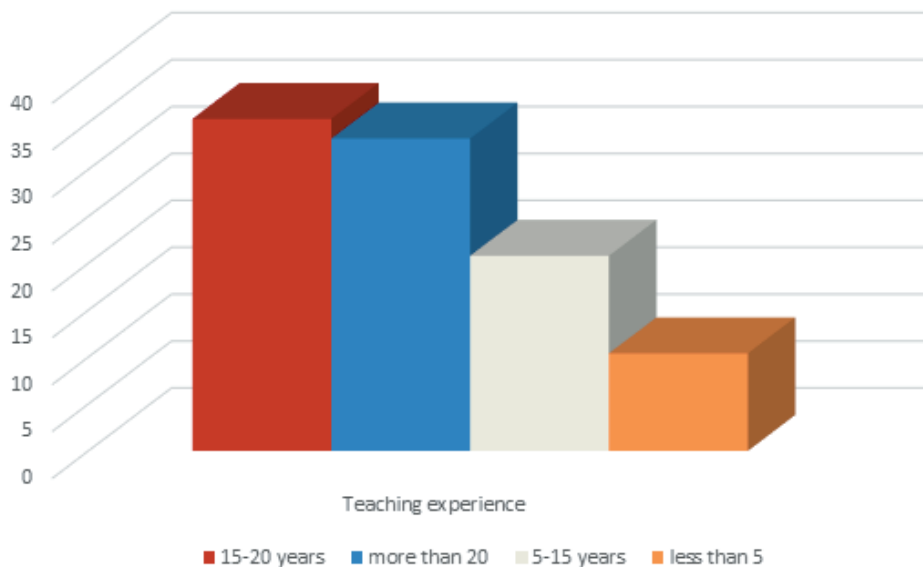


Figure 1 - Respondents' teaching experience.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data indicated that almost 94% of the respondents used digital tools even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Further analysis showed that around 33% of teachers used digital tools every week. On the other hand, about 40% of teachers used them several times a year. Bearing in mind the fact that we live and work in the so-called digital age, the results are not as expected.

During remote teaching caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions, following the recommendations of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia, decided to use some of the available digital communication tools. The surveyed teachers confirmed that their educational institutions mainly chose Google Classroom. The teachers were satisfied with the options provided by this tool. They liked the possibility of creating a central home for classroom activities. Although Google Classroom is not a fully featured learning management system, it has powerful features such as creating and collecting assignments, grading assignments, and providing adequate feedback as well as returning them to students. According to the respondents, the main shortcoming of this tool is having no possibility to communicate in real-time. Besides Google Classroom, they mainly used Google Meet as a synchronous language learning tool. Respondents agreed that the use of Google Meet can be remarkably effective if it is well managed by the teachers to stimulate student engagement during lessons. A smaller number of institutions preferred Microsoft Teams.

This tool enables them to set up virtual classrooms and keep assignments organised which proved to be particularly useful. MS Teams helps teachers synchronise all their apps, documents, and resources in one secure location which can be accessed from anywhere.

Language teachers always strive to create an interactive classroom environment. With the COVID-19 pandemic and suspension of all types of face-to-face activities, including in-person education, teachers and students had to change their teaching and learning methods, regardless of whether they were experienced in and prepared for online education or not and quickly adapt to new reality which is often named as emergency remote education [20]. In the beginning, teachers struggle to motivate students in a virtual classroom. Both teachers and learners were forced to step out of their comfort zone and face not only technical problems such as audio, video, or connection issues but also a sense of isolation. With the aim of motivating students to actively participate in the teaching process in an online environment, teachers resorted to using various digital resources that were available to them. The results showed that about 83% of the respondents used digital tools more often in virtual classrooms than in traditional ones.

According to the research results, the most commonly used digital tool in virtual language teaching is Google Forms, followed by Kahoot and Quizziz. A small percentage of respondents reported WordUp as the best digital tool for teaching/learning English.

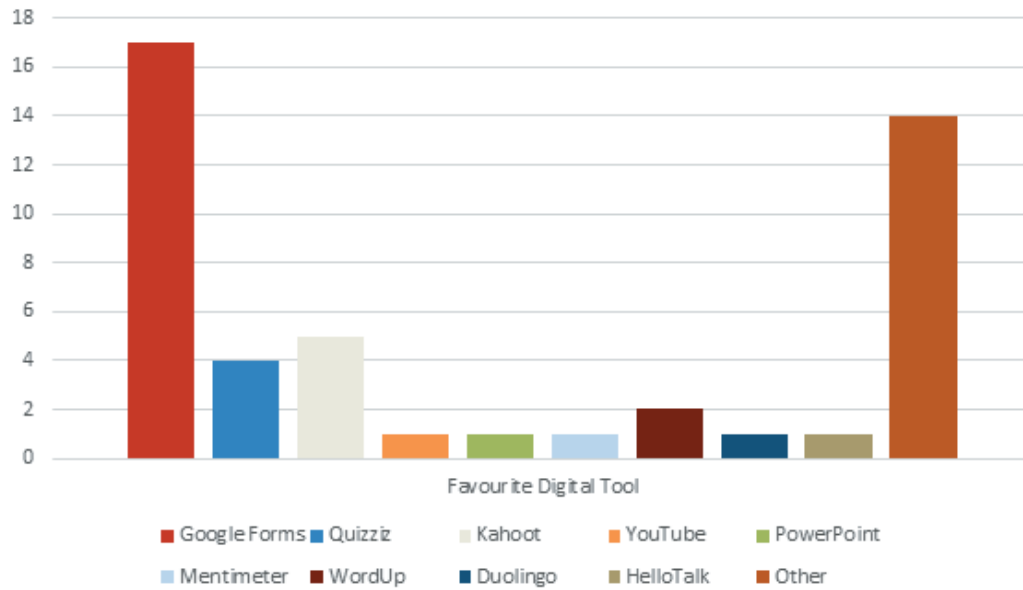


Figure 2 - Favourite Digital Tool.

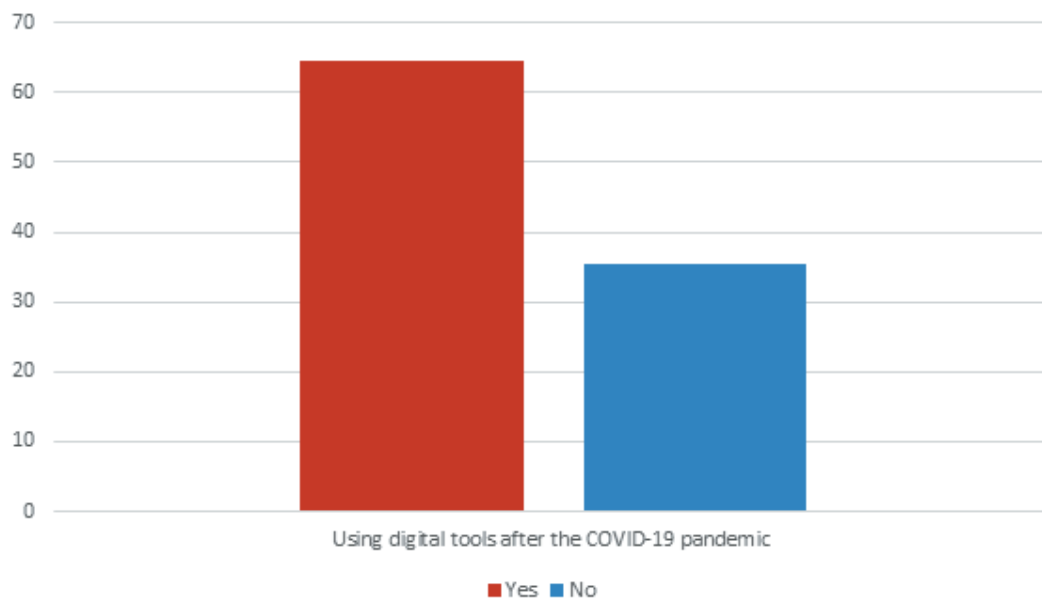


Figure 3 - Using digital tools in traditional classrooms after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost 36% of respondents consider Google Forms to be the best and simplest tool for creating quizzes, sign-ups, and feedback forms. Google Forms can be easily incorporated into Google Classroom and teachers often use it to assess their students' knowledge either at the beginning or at the end of the class. They liked a variety of question types that can be used while creating personalized quizzes or tests. The option of inserting images, videos, and various multimedia content is especially useful when it comes to young learners.

Kahoot, sometimes referred to as a student-response tool for all platforms, is regularly used by around 10% of respondents. This game-based learning platform enables

fun learning, boosts engagement, and has a positive effect on attendance and classroom dynamics.

After the COVID-19 pandemic ended, public education returned to normal. Teachers and students were brought back into schools, but surprisingly or not, almost 65% of respondents continue to use digital tools they had been using previously. They mainly use the same tools – Google Classroom, Google Forms, Kahoot, and Quizzis. Teachers reported that they found it difficult to deal with the challenges of online learning, especially regarding lack of effective communication, staying up to date with modern technology and time-consuming administrative work.



5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital tools in language teaching, and the interest and need to use these tools continue to grow even as the pandemic wanes. Digital tools are progressing and improving, providing teachers with even more opportunities to enhance their students' language learning experiences. The creative use of digital tools in language teaching offers numerous benefits for language learning. Therefore, teachers need to consider incorporating digital tools into their teaching to enhance the quality of teaching and encourage independent language learning.

Here are some pedagogical implications that arise from the research conducted:

- Teachers should use a variety of digital tools to cater to the different learning styles and needs of their students. Using digital tools can help students engage with the language in diverse ways, which can enhance their motivation to learn.
- Teachers should be open to exploring innovative technologies and digital tools and develop their digital competencies to incorporate these tools into their teaching effectively and creatively. This will enable them to keep up with the latest trends and provide students with relevant and engaging learning experiences.
- Creative use of digital tools in teaching can help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and creativity. Teachers should encourage students to explore and experiment with digital tools to build their skills and confidence in using technology.
- The integration of digital tools in teaching can help teachers tailor their instruction to the individual needs of students and create a more personalized classroom experience. Digital tools can be used to monitor student progress and provide real-time feedback, enabling teachers to adjust their instruction and promote learning.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, teachers should be willing to incorporate digital tools in their teaching in order to stimulate language learning. The creative use of digital tools in language teaching can provide a wealth of opportunities for students to develop their language skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. We examined various digital tools available to teachers, including language learning apps and platforms, word processing software, social media, and more. We also provided examples of how these tools can be creatively used in the classroom to boost language learning. Integrating digital tools in the classroom enables students to connect with the language in diverse ways, boosts their motivation, develops their language learning skills, and improves their intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, these tools foster classroom interaction, leading to improved communication and social skills. Moreover, digital tools assist teachers in tailoring their teaching to the individual needs of students, thus creating a more personalized classroom experience. Furthermore, digital tools are also beneficial for formative assessment, evaluation, and tracking of student progress. Teachers can use digital tools to monitor student performance and provide real-time feedback to adjust instruction and encourage learning. Digital tools also provide a more efficient way to evaluate student work, enabling teachers to identify areas where students need more support and tailor their teaching accordingly.

In summary, the creative use of digital tools in language teaching offers many benefits for both teachers and students. By incorporating digital tools into their teaching, teachers can enhance their students' language learning, develop their digital competencies, and improve formative assessment, evaluation, and tracking of student progress.



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