

Online interaction / digital competence¹

Technology-mediated digital spaces have become 'normalised' in our societies (Bax 2003, 2011), radically transforming the way we produce, share and communicate remotely and indeed whole industries (e.g., music, gaming, news, movies: Luke, 2005). As a recent Council of Europe Recommendation to member states reminds us: "... the digital environment provides an unprecedented means for people to express themselves, to assemble and participate, and opens new opportunities to improve access and inclusion" (Council of Europe CM/Rec(2019)10). Today's learners are digital natives who have adopted technology as a sixth sense, for whom technology-mediated communication and online transactions have become so normal that they serve as the principal means through which they interact with the world (Hershatter and Epstein 2010). These new digital environments create spaces for the richness and creativity of plurilingual competence (Melo-Pfeifer 2015). One could even go so far as to say that online communication is inevitably plurilingual and pluricultural, with alternation between languages, code meshing and the integration of icons and symbols, and audio-visual codes and conventions (Séror, forthcoming). It is also directly action-oriented and a natural field for the development and use of mediation as a social practice.

'Online' interaction is a useful umbrella term which complements the literature on digital literacies. It integrates different interactional and transactional modalities, media and images, as well as paralinguistic features of communication. The result is a dynamic, media-rich flexible and creative communication, frequently embedding live-links and asynchronous texts, images, audio and video clips that make the communication interactive over time (Ivkovic and Lotherington 2009; Lotherington and Jenson 2011; Pegrum 2010).

Online interaction:

- involves multiple remote social actors who can flexibly remix media and texts to support their message
- is fluid, often following a non-linear progression, with embedded media and hyperlinks to illustrate and/or emphasise, to support reader autonomy, and to add perceived credibility (Pegrum 2010).
- involves both interpersonal and human-machine interaction as well as multimodality
- is sometimes collaborative, sometimes discursive and sometimes ludic
- requires explicit clarity of the message
- can be synchronous, asynchronous, spoken and written, and is often a blend of these, implying the need to point out instances of synchronous and asynchronous interaction

Further development is constantly transforming views of language use and therefore expectations of language learning (Leppänen and Peuronen, 2012). These technological innovations (e.g. social media, YouTube, wikis, blogs) facilitate the ability to easily generate and share a rich variety of multimodal and multilingual user content, which brings new pedagogical possibilities, expanding the scope of genres and cultural artifacts, opportunities for creativity and for exploring complex identities (see for example Ollivier 2018). In addition, E-twinning projects provide platforms for action-oriented communication and collaborative project work across frontiers (see for example Cinganotto and Langé 2020).

¹ This text is an extract from Piccardo, E. and North, B. (in press), "Enriching the scope of language education: The CEFR Companion Volume", Chapter 1 in North B., Piccardo E., Goodier T., Fasoglio D., Margonis R. and Rüschoff B. (eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume in practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

To summarise the advantages of technology-mediated interaction for action-oriented, plurilingual language learning, digital tools and digitally enhanced collaborative spaces provide affordances for: agency; authenticity; output orientation; action orientation; competence orientation; self-directed (collaborative) knowledge construction; flexibility in participatory classroom practice and interaction; and flexibility in time and space. Digital technologies not only serve as sources of content but can also be used to create action-oriented learning spaces that instil genuine and purposeful authentic language use, collaboration and interaction (Rüschhoff 2018).

The exploitation of digital tools and integration of digital interaction aligns well with the methodological message of the CEFR that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations. The CEFR descriptive scheme and the action-oriented approach put the co-construction of meaning (through interaction) at the centre of the learning and teaching process. Communicative language competence also remains central to online interaction, as does text literacy (Pegrum 2010), language and text underpinning multimodal digital literacies and socio-emotional literacies (Eshet-Alkalai 2004).

However, the online medium breaks the conventional boundaries between spoken and written, between verbal and non-verbal. Technologically-mediated interaction brings great advantages in terms of flexibility and multimodality, but at the same time it brings drawbacks. For example, misunderstandings can be expected to be more frequent and less easy to spot and correct than is the case in face-to-face communication. There is a need for repetition, for redundancy, for ensuring that a message is more explicit than might need to be the case face-to-face. The use of tone, stress and prosody to modulate meaning and paralinguistic signals of emotional reactions or irony are each more difficult to catch. Choice of registers is more fluid – but still possible to get wrong. These are all aspects easier to handle at a higher level of language proficiency, but user/learners at all levels of proficiency need to mediate communication with redundancy, and develop strategies to avoid and if necessary repair misunderstandings

The CEFR Companion Volume does not try to provide a framework for digital literacies, but focuses instead on the communicative language activity involved, applying the principles of the action-oriented approach to provide descriptors for different levels of interactive competences in online environments. As the Companion Volume puts it, the descriptors:

... “concern the multimodal activity typical of web use, including just checking or exchanging responses, spoken interaction and longer production in live link-ups, using chat (written spoken language), longer blogging or written contributions to discussion, and embedding other media.” (Council of Europe 2020: 25)

In developing the descriptors, the focus was put on the goal of the communication rather than on the modality (written or oral distinguishing between open-ended socially-driven interaction: ‘Conversation and discussion’), on the one hand, and interest-driven interaction: ‘Goal-oriented transactions and collaboration’ on the other. Core elements of the construct that informed the descriptors are:

- the need for more redundancy in messages;
- the need to check that the message has been correctly understood;
- the ability to reformulate in order to help comprehension, deal with misunderstanding;
- the ability to handle emotional reactions and to demonstrate inter-cultural sensitivity;
- the capacity to participate in sustained interaction with one or more interlocutors;
- the capacity to react to other people’s posts and embedded media and to compose posts and contributions for others to respond to;
- the ability to include symbols, images, and other codes to broaden or refine the content or scope of a message;
- the understanding of implications of synchronous (real time) and asynchronous interaction



Some of the elements used to distinguish between levels are: the ability to handle synchronous and collaborative group discourse; the ability to modulate register, to embed the affective, emotional and ironic dimension, to deal with linguistic and cultural misunderstandings, and the degree of autonomy shown.

The descriptors reflect a broader aim of the CEFR Companion Volume to enrich the tools and interactional spaces available to educators for an integrationist, situated approach to learning. They are intended to help educators to formulate aims and outcomes in learning, teaching and assessment, without being constrained by 'the standardised testing culture that functions as watchdog over flat literacy practices' (Lotherington and Jenson 2011).

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