Supporting online language education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Insights into language teachers' use of action-oriented, plurilingual scenarios in Northern Italy

By Karam Noel, Rebecca Schmor, Andre Scholze, & Enrica Piccardo, University of Toronto

Abstract

The shift to remote classes due to COVID-19 required teachers to reimagine their pedagogical practice and develop new strategies for providing quality language education in online environments. The sudden transition also meant teachers had to intentionally create affordances for online interaction or risk reverting to methods that ignore the interactive and socially-mediated aspects of language learning. Given this, and considering the especially devastating impact of the early pandemic across the Northern region of Italy, this article reports on an intervention that supported language teachers in Lombardy in selecting and adopting research-informed, online pedagogical resources in their teaching contexts. These included fully developed plurilingual and action-oriented scenarios, a social engagement platform, and an e-portfolio with reflective and interactive self-assessment tools. Survey data collected pre- (n=1218) and post-intervention (n=85) highlighted a drastic shift in teachers' perceived challenges and opportunities of distance language education along with a stark contrast in their use of the online environment. Namely, while collaborative activities and group work were initially reported as the least used and most challenging resources and modalities, after the intervention, they were reported as the most used and greatest opportunity in the online environment. Subsequent teacher interviews (n=25) illustrated how the use of plurilingual and action-oriented tools and resources supported authentic and inclusive collaboration between linguistically and culturally diverse learners. Study findings suggest the need for continued innovation in distance and blended language learning contexts, especially in ways that support teachers and learners to adapt to and mediate novelty and uncertainty. Practitioner takeaways, specifically for the ESOL context, are explored through the voices of the Lombardy teachers.

A new global educational reality: The impact of COVID-19 on Lombardy, Italy

On February 20, 2020, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported in the Lombardy Region of Northern Italy; a district with a population of roughly 10 million (Cereda et al., 2021). In the weeks that followed, Lombardy in particular but also neighbouring regions in Italy experienced a very rapid surge of positive cases, prompting public health officials to activate an emergency response and enforce a wide range of measures, including strict stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and regular testing. For educational institutions, this meant a sudden pivot from classroom-based instruction to online distance education, which required teachers to reimagine their teaching practice and implement pedagogically context-appropriate interventions with little to no time for preparation. For language teachers, the rapid transition to the online medium also meant difficulties with upholding the socially interactive dimension of language, along with the added pressures of navigating emergent technologies, adapting in-person activities and materials, and mediating learner progress in the new online environment. Language education was particularly affected by the COVID-19 emergency since it is not a content subject: It is a medium that requires action and collaboration together with meaningful opportunities for communication. Therefore, without the appropriate resources, tools, and modalities, education in the online medium risked reverting to traditional, teacher-centered approaches that ignore the socially mediated and interactive nature of language. Given this, and in light of the especially devastating impact of the early pandemic in Northern Italy, there was an urgent need to support Lombardy teachers in exploring innovative online pedagogies and developing best practices of online language education (LE).

In search of innovative pedagogies: A cross-Atlantic collaboration

In September 2020, in response to the immediate and future needs of online LE, Enrica Piccardo, a researcher at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, partnered on a

project to support language teacher's implementation of collaborative, action-oriented online pedagogies that recognize and encourage linguistic and cultural diversity. The partnership was developed with Lombardy's Ministry of Education in Italy, the Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per la Lombardia (USRLo), and was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. The USRLo is the ministerial coordinating educational institution for all primary and secondary schools in the region of Lombardy and was the ideal partner for several reasons. The USRLo has had a long tradition of collaborative work in the field of LE through the creation of communities of practice by teachers of different languages across school levels. Schools in the region offer a broad range of languages in addition to Italian, including English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Mandarin. USRLo has also played a pivotal role in Italy in its commitment to implementing the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR) (CoE, 2001; CoE, 2020), an international language policy document that is used worldwide and promotes an action-oriented, collaborative, and socially mediated approach to LE.

The action-oriented approach and plurilingualism

The action-oriented approach (AoA) gained momentum following the Council of Europe's publication of the CEFR in 2001 and its new extended and updated edition in 2020. The characteristics and forms of language use and language learning in this approach are more clearly defined than in previous communicative approaches, such as task-based learning, as they emphasize the individual learner and their language competences as well as the meaningful situations in which learners perform and accomplish tasks (Piccardo & North, 2019). In the AoA, the classroom is treated as a field of action in which learners perceive and act on affordances (Gallagher, 2015; Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Further, the AoA emphasizes the social and mediated nature of language, encouraging collaborative, reflective, and self-regulated learning during real-life tasks and project work. Learners, seen as individualized beings, or 'social agents' (CoE, 2001; CoE, 2020), work together to develop strategic perspective, autonomy, and agency as they produce a tangible artifact that they can use to showcase their learning (Piccardo & North, 2019). And, by working towards and achieving common goals, they experience a greater sense of self-efficacy and success (Bandura, 2001).

In this process of active and collaborative meaning-making, individual learners draw on their diverse plurilingual repertoires. Distinct from multilingualism—which describes the presence of multiple languages—plurilingualism highlights the interconnected nature of languages themselves and the holistic nature of individual linguistic repertoires (Piccardo, 2013; Piccardo et al., 2021). It also validates individuals' partial and dynamic language competences, while promoting the value of expanding all language knowledge (Berthoud et al., 2015; Coste et al., 2009; Furlong, 2009; Piccardo, 2018). In the classroom, plurilingual pedagogies have proven to result in critical and creative strategies for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse language learners (Galante, 2020; Lau & Van Viegen, 2020).

Approaches that encourage the active use of learners' plurilingual repertoires in the language classroom and that prepare learners to perform real-life, action-oriented tasks can improve the effectiveness of LE and simultaneously help preserve and enhance linguistic diversity (CoE, 2020; Piccardo & Galante, 2018; Piccardo et al., 2022). This further highlights the importance of implementing up-to-date methodologies that encourage learners, teachers, and stakeholders to view language use as flexible and dynamic, and to mediate learning through learners' existing linguistic and cultural resources, which was one of the intended outcomes of the research project.

The research project: Supporting online language education in times of crisis

The international research project sought to explore the benefits and drawbacks of teaching and learning languages online and support teachers in implementing collaborative action-oriented approaches in distance education. The partnering language teachers in Lombardy were provided with online resources reflecting action-oriented and plurilingual pedagogies, developed through a previous SSHRC-Funded research project, LINguistic and Cultural DIversity REinvented (LINCDIRE) (https://www.lincdireproject.org), a partnership of North-American and European Institutions, including universities, schools, and educational institutions involved in the teaching of western and indigenous languages. Embodying the core concepts of plurilingualism, action-orientation, holistic reflection, and technology as its pillars, the LINCDIRE resources promote a view of language learning that not only recognizes students' existing linguistic and cultural knowledge, but also encourages conscious and purposeful integration of this knowledge as a resource in learning a new language. LINCDIRE's online resources include fully developed plurilingual and action-oriented scenarios, a social engagement platform, and an e-portfolio—Language Integration Through E-Portfolio (LITE)—with reflective and interactive self-assessment tools.

The project was carried out in five phases. In phase 1 (November 2020), language teachers across Lombardy (n=1218) responded to a pre-intervention survey investigating the tools, resources, and modalities used in distance education and the perceived challenges and opportunities associated with their use. During phase 2 (December 2020 – June 2021), a group of team leaders (n=12) recruited and supported participating teachers (n=90) to implement LITE's plurilingual, action-oriented scenarios in their classes. In phase 3 (June 2021), the participating teachers (n=85) responded to a post-intervention survey about the implementation of the LITE tool, resources, and modalities and the perceived successes and areas for improvement. In phase 4 (July 2021), select participating teachers (n=25) participated in semi-structured interviews on their use of LITE. And finally, in phase 5 (still ongoing), other participating teachers (n=24) were selected to contribute to a collection of case studies describing their use of the LITE platform and the action-oriented scenarios.

The intervention: Use of plurilingual, action-oriented scenarios

The intervention (i.e., phase 3 above) consisted of teachers selecting and adapting plurilingual, action-oriented scenarios on the online LITE portal. For instance, a German teacher with a class of low-intermediate learners might choose the B1-level scenario «Let's Go For Dinner.» Currently offered in English and Spanish, this teacher would need to translate the descriptions of the scenario steps (e.g., finding restaurants, comparing alternatives, discussing crosscultural restaurant etiquette, etc.) into German, possibly adapting some of the content according to the particular group of students. Adaptations in this scenario could include, for example, changing the currency or proposed dinner budget depending on location and socioeconomic factors. Before and after completing the scenario steps, this teacher would guide her German students through a series of *level checks*—a reflective exercise using can-do statements—which would produce visual radar charts showing the development of competences across different languages and cultures in the students' individual repertoires. Throughout the scenario, the class would also be engaged in a series of reflection posts which, inspired by the Ojibwe nation's medicine wheel for holistic and effective teaching, prompt learners to write about their development in an all-encompassing way, considering mind, body, emotions, and community. In addition to this self-assessment activity, the teacher would also have access to prepared assessment checklists for each scenario, which are aligned to the scenario outcomes, CEFR levels, and selected can-do statements. Finally, LITE users setting up their online profiles are asked to create a *plurilingual journey* detailing and showcasing their language learning and cultural experiences, in an environment that simulates social media environments by liking and commenting on posts, viewing each other's profiles, adding friends, and sending messages. Thus, students engaged in this scenario on LITE would also have the chance to interact with their classmates, teacher, and other LITE users. As these five main resources and functionalities—scenarios, level checks, reflections, social media, and my plurilingual journey—are designed to work together to promote reflection, engagement, and collaboration in language learning. Indeed, these results emerged in the data findings of the research project.

Survey findings: Increased learner engagement and collaboration

The survey data collected post-intervention suggests that the use of LITE had a positive impact on distance LE, making it more collaborative, reflective, and student-centered. When teachers were initially surveyed in November 2020, before their implementation of the LITE tool and LINCDIRE resources, they identified learner engagement as the main *challenge* of distance education and reported relying primarily on lectures and textbooks to conduct their online language classes. This is perhaps because teachers were struggling to find and create appropriate online materials while also learning how to effectively manage the virtual

classroom environment. As one teacher remarked, "*you don't just become a Youtuber... you need time to create products that are interesting and visually appealing.*" Another teacher expressed that "*it's not easy to organize group work at a distance because some students just don't participate.*" Consistent with these quotes, at this stage of the project, the *least* used resources and modalities were found to be collaborative activities and group work.

In contrast, in the second survey completed after the implementation of the scenarios, the same teachers identified the main *opportunity* of the LITE tool as learner engagement and reported the *most* used resources and modalities as being collaborative activities and group work. One teacher shared that her students "*have a lot of conflict normally, but in this situation, they found a way to collaborate and also an interest in other languages and cultures.*" According to this teacher, "*it was a very good way to make them work together.*" The drastic shift in the perceived challenges and opportunities of distance language education from the first survey to the next along with the stark contrast in the use of online resources and modalities can be attributed to the plurilingual and action-oriented approach behind the LITE platform. The emphasis on using materials that value diversity and activities that prioritize real-world situations explains why teachers described their use of LITE as resulting in a more authentic, inclusive, and dynamic pedagogy. These findings support the case for the need for continued innovation in distance and blended language learning contexts, especially in ways that support learners to adapt to and mediate novelty and uncertainty.

Interview findings: More authentic and inclusive pedagogy

After conducting interviews with teachers who previously participated in the surveys, it was found that the use of LITE led to increased collaboration, authenticity, diversity, and inclusion. During the implementation of one scenario, «Creating a Community Cookbook,» the collaboration extended to the broader community as parents were involved in contributing family recipes in different languages for a French class. This teacher described her participation in the project as "*an experience that turned out to be useful not only for me and my class, but also for my colleagues.*" She went on to share how "*it involved the whole educational community—the school, the students, and the families.*" In a German classroom, another teacher decided to adapt the scenario «Lost in a New Town» to make the learning experience more authentic and motivating for her students. She explained: "*My school usually does an exchange year with a school in Leipzig, so I said, guys, let's pretend you're in Leipzig, like you will be next year, and you've gotten lost and your phone doesn't work. What do you do?*" The teachers' reported experiences again emphasize the value of adopting plurilingual, action-oriented pedagogies that place the learner in real-world situations, allowing them to strategically make use of their full linguistic and cultural resources as they collaborate with others and fulfill the task at hand.

Collaboration and authenticity were also paired with linguistic and cultural diversity in another school, where two Spanish teachers worked together to have their students complete the scenario «Language Learning Community Blog.» These students blogged about their previous language learning experiences and then joined classes on Zoom to present their final blog posts to each other. One of the teachers involved in this collaboration explained how "*preparing an interview to present to your own classmates is one thing, but it's very different if you have to really present it to another class and ask real questions to learn something from the work of others.*" The other teacher commented on the cultural and linguistic diversity present in this authentic collaboration, expressing how "*when you have to present about the cultural history of Germany and then share it with Italians but through the use of Spanish, there is a very interesting union of different linguistic resources which is something that isn't usually done.*" The latter teacher's words capitalize on the importance of embracing an openness and appreciation towards various linguistic and cultural resources and recognizing that neither should be compartmentalized.

Finally, in completing the scenario «How Are You Feeling,» another teacher shared how "*the students with special needs really wanted to participate and make the video like all the others, and so they did everything, and they wanted to ask and be asked for help, and so it was really inclusive.*" She went on to express how "*the inclusive character of this methodology, this cooperative learning, helps students in difficulty to also produce something,*" creating increased access for diverse groups of students and enabling them to contribute to the group in meaningful and personal ways.

Practitioner takeaways: Implications for the ESOL context

For teachers wishing to implement action-oriented, plurilingual scenarios in their own contexts, teachers from Lombardy had the following advice: First, get to know the platform and what it offers. As one Spanish teacher expressed, "*it's important to take the time for you and your students to familiarize yourselves with the platform.*" A German teacher noted that "*you have to be careful to choose a scenario that is right for the level of your class and not try to make it higher than their current level.*" Another shared that "*for the first time, it is best to use the scenario as is on the platform and then make changes later as necessary.*"

Teachers also encouraged planning ahead and allowing enough time to complete the different steps of the scenario. Two Spanish teachers advised "*taking it step by step*" and "*not rushing things.*" Other advice included keeping an open mind: One teacher recommended "*not being afraid and just going for it.*" Another advised to "*use all the opportunities*" and really "t*ry everything*" available on LITE. A last piece of advice was to be creative. As one English teacher shared, "*my advice would be to make the scenario personal, maybe also choosing together with the students the topic of the scenario.*" Another teacher suggested "*to get another class involved and work together on the final task*" of the scenario. Finally, a French teacher

said to "*study the scenario well, but then leave it alone so you can be creative and adapt it to your reality; your context*."

Given the diverse contexts in which English language teaching takes place, the implementation of action-oriented and plurilingual scenarios in ESOL contexts would certainly provide meaningful opportunities to engage learners in authentic and inclusive collaborations.

References

Bandura, A. (2001) Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52,* 1–26.

Berthoud, A. C., Grin, F., & Lüdi, G. (2015). The DYLAN project: Language dynamics and management of diversity. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics, 3*(1), 145–153.

Cereda, D., Manica, M., Tirani, M., Rovida, F., Demicheli, V., Ajelli, M., Poletti, P., Trentini, F., Guzzetta, G., Marziano, V., Piccarreta, R., Barone, A., Magoni, M., Deandrea, S., Diurno, G., Lombardo, M., Faccini, M., Pan, A., Bruno, R., … Merler, S. (2021). The early phase of the COVID-19 epidemic in Lombardy, Italy. *Epidemics, 37*, 100528. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.epidem.2021.100528

Coste, D., Moore, D., & Zarate, G. (2009). *Plurilingual and pluricultural competence: Studies towards a Common European Framework of Reference for language learning and teaching*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. https://rm.coe.int/168069d29b

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press. http://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages

Council of Europe (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989

Furlong, A. (2009). The relation of plurilingualism/culturalism to creativity: A matter of perception. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 6*(4), 343–368.

Galante, A. (2020). "The moment I realized I am plurilingual": Plurilingual tasks for creative representations in EAP at a Canadian university. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *11*(4), 551–580.

Gallagher, S. (2015) Seeing things in the right way: How social interaction shapes perception. In M. Doyon & T. Breyer (Eds.), *Normativity in perception* (pp. 117–127). Palgrave MacMillan.
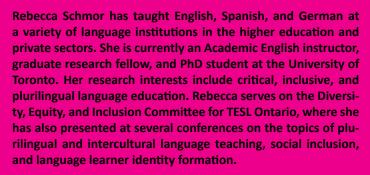
Käufer S., & Chemero A. (2015). *Phenomenology: An Introduction*. Polity Press.

Lau, S. M. C., & Van Viegen, S. (Eds). (2020). *Plurilingual pedagogies: Critical and creative endeavors for equitable language in education*. Sprinter International Publishing.

Piccardo, E. (2013). Plurilingualism and curriculum design: Toward a synergic vision. *TESOL Quarterly, 47*(3), 600–614. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.110

Piccardo, E. (2018). Plurilingualism: Vision, conceptualization, and practices. In P. P. Trifonas & T. Aravossitas (Eds.), *Handbook of research and practice in heritage language education* (pp. 207–226). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-38893-9_47-1

Piccardo, E., & Galante, A. (2018). Plurilingualism and agency in language education: The role of dramatic action-oriented tasks. In J. Choi & S. Ollerhead (Eds.), *Plurilingualism in learning and teaching: Complexities across contexts* (pp. 147–164). Routledge.

Piccardo, E., Germain-Rutherford, A., & Lawrence, G. (2021). *The Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Plurilingual-Language-Education/Piccardo-Germain-Rutherford-Lawrence/p/book/9781138545625

Piccardo, E., Lawrence, G., Germain-Rutherford, A., & Galante, A. (2022). *Activating linguistic and cultural diversity in the language classroom*. Springer International Publishing. https://link.springer.com/book/9783030871239

Piccardo, E., & North, B. (2019). *The Action-oriented approach*. Multilingual Matters. https://www.multilingual-matters.com/page/detail/?k=9781788924351

Author Bios

Karam Noel is a PhD student at the University of Toronto, with research interests in second language learning, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, language assessment, and plurilingual/action-based pedagogies. Since 2018, he has held a primary instructional/administrative role at McMaster University, where he provides English-language learners with individualized support and a selection of academic, socio-cultural, and communication/professional skills-based workshops.

Rebecca Schmor has taught English, Spanish, and German at a variety of language institutions in the higher education and private sectors. She is currently an Academic English instructor, graduate research fellow, and PhD student at the University of Toronto. Her research interests include critical, inclusive, and plurilingual language education. Rebecca serves on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee for TESL Ontario, where she has also presented at several conferences on the topics of plurilingual and intercultural language teaching, social inclusion, and language learner identity formation.

Andre Scholze is a PhD student in the Language and Literacies Education program in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He holds a Bachelors of Arts in Business Management from UFSC / Brazil and a Master of Arts in TESOL degree from Eastern Michigan University / US. His research focuses on plurilingualism, language education, teacher beliefs and alternative assessment. Andre has extensive experience teaching English as a foreign / second language in Brazil, USA and Canada.

Enrica Piccardo is a Professor of Applied Linguistics and Language Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and director of the Centre for Educational research in Languages and Literacies (CERLL). A collaborator with the Council of Europe (CoE) since 2008 and Co-author of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020), she has coordinated international research projects on language teaching innovation and teacher education in Canada and Europe. Her research spans language teaching approaches/curricula, multi/plurilingualism, creativity and complexity in language education.