Inclusive Language Education and Digital Technology
Edited by Elina Vilar Beltrán, Chris Abbott, and Jane Jones

$39.95
ISBN: 9781847699725
Book (Paperback)
Multilingual Matters
200 pages
2013

Reviewed by
ANA SEVILLA-PAVÓN
Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil


This book presents, in a pedagogically-sound and theory-grounded manner, the interdisciplinary collaboration and insights provided by numerous practitioners and specialists involved in technology-supported modern foreign language (MFL) teaching to students with special education needs (SEN). The book’s contributions show how the different fields can complement each other so as to make a valuable contribution towards increasing the language learning opportunities of learners with hearing or visual impairments, dyslexia, and other difficulties. While its focus is on the situation in the UK, there are several illustrative case studies from different places across Europe.

The publication is divided into two parts: “Part 1: The Key Issues” is mainly theoretical and preceded by an introduction and a brief biography of each of the contributors; “Part 2: Case Studies” is made up of the examples in Chapters 4 to 9, followed by a conclusion. The introduction starts with a reflection on how important languages are for communication in present-day globalized societies and for people's personal enrichment, enjoyment, and growth. All of these are good reasons for teaching languages to students with SEN, while making good use of the potential of digital technologies.

In Part 1, the key issues of inclusive education and technology-enhanced language teaching and learning are identified and explored. In Chapter 1, Jones assesses recent policy changes concerning SEN and MFL education, comparing the current situation with the past, when students with SEN were not allowed to learn foreign languages. Jones reminds us that inclusion is not always effectively practiced due to the lack of an effective pedagogy, teacher training, knowledge, and resources. However, this situation is slowly improving. Jones discusses the insights and practices of three experienced and committed language teachers, showing ways to make learning for students with SEN more inclusive. The second chapter, by Abbott, presents the author’s personal view of the history of technology use by language teachers. Abbott describes technology use in the classroom and its ubiquitous use with the advent of mobile technologies and foresees a future with new language learning opportunities. In spite of being a very interesting account of the evolution of technologies, a clearer connection between technologies and inclusive language learning would have been relevant. In Chapter 3, Wilson presents a very insightful set of ten practical scenarios, pointing out the need for teachers to be critical when facing the challenges of planning their MFL lessons so as to include learners with SEN. This part is subsequently illustrated by the case studies from the last part of the volume.

Part 2 deals with a set of 5 case studies of current and emerging practices in different contexts and countries across Europe. In the first case study in Chapter 4, Vilar Beltrán and Sales Ciges analyze several cases and compare the current situation of MFL
classrooms in English and Spanish schools, drawing on research in the field and focusing on particular beliefs and practices of language teachers. The chapter ends with a timely reflection about how important technologies are for most students and how beneficial they could be for inclusive language teaching. Domagala-Zysk, in Chapter 5, deals with a case study based in Poland which illustrates different ways in which ICT can be used to improve the language learning experience and thus to foster the inclusion of the deaf and hard of hearing. The author raises important issues such as cyber-bullying, reminding us that children with severe disabilities are twice as likely to be bullied as children whose disabilities are not apparent. In Chapter 6, Meiring and Norman describe how recent policy changes in Wales have resulted in increased access to language learning for learners with SEN and the way this inclusion could benefit from the use of ICT. They also present very useful examples of their own practice and resources. Chapter 7, by Crombie, is devoted to explaining the particular needs of learners with different levels of dyslexia and is illustrated by examples drawn from the author’s experiences in Scotland. It includes specific explanations of the different digital tools which can be used by language teachers. Crombie gives evidence against the common belief that dyslexic learners are not able to learn foreign languages, arguing for the need to adopt an interdisciplinary and metacognitive perspective. She also mentions several technological tools that had been discussed earlier in the book, finishing the chapter with an opportune reflection about how teachers should avoid being too obsessed with using the latest technologies, as this could become a means of exclusion (Warschauer, 2003).

In Chapter 8, Connor focuses on how learners with difficulties can engage in learning thanks to the use of interactive, creative resources, and Web 2.0 tools. The author reemphasizes the idea that learners with SEN are perfectly capable of learning languages, and advocates for Bates, Coyle and Laverick’s (1996) seven step approach. This is followed by a comprehensive methodology and a useful list of technological tools. In Chapter 9, Wassermann and Jeitler raise very significant issues concerning copyright and its conflictive relation with both accessibility and the storage of digitalized resources. They give specific examples from an institution in Austria and show just how important changes in the law are in order to guarantee the rights of people with disabilities, as is the case with visually impaired learners. The authors also highlight how paradoxical it is that digital books and the tools to access them are often as inaccessible as printed materials. They present powerful arguments about how accessibility should become so natural in society that people would stop discussing whether we should fund a certain service.

The editors, Vilar Beltrán, Abbot and Jones, close the book by drawing sensible and pertinent conclusions about the importance of balancing the enthusiasm for technology-enhanced language teaching with an awareness of the difficulties of providing resources in a time of economic troubles in Europe and elsewhere, of the need to train reflective and well-prepared teachers, and the importance of acknowledging the role of social networks within learning communities. In spite of their reservations, they seem optimistic about the future and they point out the fact that the complex and challenging interdisciplinary collaboration of SEN, MFL teaching, and ICT has reached a mature phase of development.

“This volume might, in some way, inspire technology...professionals to come together and work collaboratively to facilitate language learning for all” (p. 175). This final statement perfectly reflects the impact that this timely and compelling book is likely to have. The great amount of inspiring experiences accounted for, the valuable advice given by experts of different fields, the numerous examples of good practice from different countries and the enthusiasm shown by each of the contributors are both remarkable and stimulating, making the book a most useful tool and a guide for everyone working towards the development of a more inclusive and accessible language learning curriculum.
REFERENCES


REVIEWER’S BIODATA

Dr. Ana Sevilla-Pavón graduated in modern languages (English and French) from the Universitat de València (Spain), completed her PhD in Applied Linguistics at the Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain) and is currently conducting postdoctoral research at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Brazil).

REVIEWER’S ADDRESS

ansepa@upvnet.upv.es