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Global Challenges in Language Education: Rethinking Curricula for Foreign Language Classrooms in the Digital Era

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Abstract This chapter examines key issues in contemporary research and explores their implications for the foreign language curriculum. After considering the role of global competence, multilingualism and global citizenship as educational goals for today's language learners, it discusses the impact of digitalisation on learning modalities and highlights the need to adopt multiliteracy-oriented approaches, integrating a renewed role for literature. Some conclusions will be drawn to contribute to ongoing reflection on the future direction of the field.

Keywords Curriculum development. Foreign language learning. Global competence. Multiliteracies. Digitalisation. Literature teaching.

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1 Introduction

> The only person who is educated is the one who has learnt how to adapt and change; the one who has realised that no knowledge is secure; that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.
> Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*, 104

Every historical period has brought its substantial challenges to education and announcements such as "the futures of learning are at a crossroad" (Lütge, Stannard 2022, 255) could reasonably have been made many times over the last centuries. Nonetheless, this is certainly one of those times. Contemporary trends in language learning and teaching call for transformative shifts in response to global issues. Among them are multilingualism and the need to preserve linguistic diversity, social inclusion connected to migration, rapid technology developments, globalisation and intercultural competence. Students, who feel and live globally connected through the internet and social media, are more and more aware of such international challenges and their worldview is shaped by such exposure. Their profiles are characterised by a consistent amount of diverse, transnational, multicultural and multilingual experiences. To adapt to this reality, changes in curricula are needed to reconceptualise educational frameworks that embrace the variety of student identities and backgrounds. Furthermore, world problems such as climate change, ecological issues, poverty, discrimination and gender inequality, technological disruption, and wars are becoming increasingly integrated into curriculum development, highlighting the need for education to address these pressing broader international challenges.

As a result, education in the twenty-first century must equip students with the necessary skills to navigate such a complex and interconnected global landscape. Given the massive circulation of information and the multiple learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom, a synchronisation of formal education with informal and non-formal education and practices has to forge today's curricula, as socialisation and learning happen at all three levels at the same time (CoE 2019a). This is strictly connected to the evolution of the concept of 'literacy' that, due to the rapid and pervasive development of information and communication media, has completely transformed our society, from postmodern to liquid (Bauman 2006). Literacy has moved from a one language-one culture paradigm, with a single method of conveying information and educating, to embracing multilingualism, multiculturalism, multimedia, and a diverse range of information and educational approaches. Language education no longer pertains solely to language-related studies, such as the first language, second and foreign languages. Instead, it is increasingly regarded as integral to every school's mission and culture, extending to

all subjects. Within this integrated language curriculum and aligned with the learning of other languages belonging to students' linguistic repertoires, foreign language learning aims to foster critical thinking, multiliteracies skills, and global citizenship, contributing to holistic human growth. This goes in the direction of empowering students to effectively address challenges and contribute positively to society. Substantial aid can come from the use of literature, which has always played a key role in the foreign language classroom, both as a means of language instruction and as an opportunity to encourage students' intercultural understanding (Hall 2005).

Drawing on these premises, this paper will discuss to what extent global changes and challenges are impacting language education today. It will also examine the role of language in fostering the so-called 'transversal' or 'global' competence, essential across the school curriculum as well as in life beyond school. Acknowledging that this is not an easy task to tackle, we will seek to contribute to understanding the developments in the field through the analysis of some of the major issues that compel stakeholders at different levels to reshape language education practices. Specifically, we will adopt a perspective that integrates the key themes underpinning this monographic issue: the role of global competence as an educational goal for today's language learners; the importance of multilingualism and global citizenship education in preparing students for participation in a globally interconnected world; the value of multiliteracies pedagogy for supporting contemporary learning modalities; and the use of literary texts as a tool to foster reflection, mediation, critical thinking, and personal engagement in the digital age. The final conclusions aim to contribute to ongoing reflections on the future direction of the field.

2 Global Competence and the Language Curriculum

Scholars in curriculum development globally urge language educators to advance wider and more complex goals beyond mere language acquisition, including critical thinking, intercultural communication and empathy, creativity and innovation, independence, teamwork, ethics awareness, and emotional intelligence, besides other skills (Naji, Subramaniam, White 2019). These are referred to as 'transversal competences', 'soft skills', 'interdisciplinary skills', 'life skills', or 'global competence'. Another term that emerged in education policy in the latter part of the twentieth century is 'twenty-first century skills', reflecting the importance of preparing young people to face the rapid challenges of the modern world heading into a new millennium (CoE 2021). The recent redefinition of 'transversal' competences by the European Commission (2018), for example, lists literacy competence, language competence, personal, social and learning

competence, and cultural awareness and expression competence. Similarly, UNESCO (2015a) includes reflective thinking, interpersonal skills (such as communication and collaboration skills) along with media and information literacy.

In the field of foreign language learning, enhancing global competence means developing the ability to communicate effectively and interact respectfully with people from different cultural backgrounds, understanding and appreciating diverse perspectives, and being open to learning about and adapting to new cultural norms and global issues. Recently, a large study made on young language learners from 27 countries confirmed the positive relationship between foreign language learning and global competence, regardless of the specific cultural (individualist versus collectivist) background (Guo et al. 2024). This confirms the need for language curriculum to integrate the knowledge of the target culture and promote learners' ability to use the language to communicate across different social-cultural environments with ease.

In line with this is current research on 'transcultural' communication, which has emerged as an approach that builds upon and expands 'intercultural' communication theories by focusing on dynamic, fluid interactions across cultures and languages (De Bartolo 2023). Unlike intercultural communication, which emphasises interaction between distinct cultures, transcultural communication explores how individuals move 'through and across' cultural boundaries, creating blended cultural spaces and challenging clear-cut cultural distinctions (Baker, Sangiamchit 2019, 472). This approach highlights the complexity and fluidity of cultural and linguistic practices, where traditional borders become blurred, inviting new perspectives on global communication. For this to happen, specific attention to multilingual education and citizenship education is needed, as the following paragraphs will show.

2.1 Multilingual Education

In a foreign language curriculum, multilingual education directly supports the development of global competence by equipping students with the linguistic and cultural tools they need to thrive in a diverse, interconnected world. The proliferation of language policies aimed at promoting multilingualism and other related competencies in the last two decades certainly goes in this direction. Designing curricula where educational goals across all school subjects intersect with the specific objectives of each subject is particularly recommended. This notion is clearly expressed in a recent report of the European Commission (2020), evocatively titled *Education Begins with Language*:

> Mastering multiple languages is key to enhancing the life and work of all individuals […] in addition to promoting mobility, lifelong and innovative learning, and removing barriers to social inclusion. (1)

> The development of the language of schooling, foreign languages and pupils' home languages form an integral part of each subject at school. (19)

Literacy and multilingual competences are central here: increasing awareness and proficiency of languages that compose to the learners' repertoire, in all their forms (verbal and nonverbal), is pivotal to enable students' success at school and out of school. The values, areas of knowledge, and skills underlying the transversal competencies mentioned above are largely connected, either implicitly or explicitly, to language and culture. They include the ability to understand and use language for self-realisation and to foster positive, empathetic relationships with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This evolution represents a challenge to traditional classroom pedagogy, often rooted in antiquated ideologies that emphasised single-language, single-culture, and single-nation paradigms. A change is needed that requires a restructuring of thought to overcome narrow, self-referential views, a change in the mindset of policymakers and education practitioners, so that comprehensive language education policies are adopted, and innovative and inclusive language teaching methods and strategies are employed. In line with this, a recent cross-national study involving 298 experts in multilingualism and education from five European countries (Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain) examined the main perceived research priorities in multilingual education. Findings show that experts have identified an urgent need to discover effective ways to support multilingualism in mainstream education, as opposed to special classes. This need is closely tied to the priority of conducting further research on didactic approaches that align with how multilingual learners naturally use languages (Duarte et al. 2020). Furthermore, assessing plurilingual, intercultural, and democratic competences presents challenges in multilingual education due to the nature of the learning involved. While each of these competences involves specific knowledge elements (e.g., grammatical structures of the languages within an individual's plurilingual repertoire), they are also characterised by the development of metacognitive abilities, the expression of attitudes, personal traits, and underlying cultural values and beliefs (Borghetti, Barrett 2023), making them complex to evaluate.

Therefore, special attention should be given to 'translingual' and 'transcultural' competence (Kramsch 2010), which emerges through learners' language use, as young people are required not only to

apply their communication skills effectively in face-to-face interactions but also across a wide range of digital platforms and communication formats – such as social media, emails, and online forums – integrating different languages and semiotic systems. All this is critical for fostering global citizenship.

2.2 Global Citizenship Education

With the *Global education guidelines*, which is now at its third edition (CoE 2019a), a group of experts of the Council of Europe have conceptualised concrete methodological solutions on how to deal with literacy on global issues both in formal and non-formal education contexts. On a similar note, and closely connected to the new global 2030 Agenda (UNESCO 2016), is the pedagogic document titled *Global Citizenship Education* published by UNESCO (2015b), which sets forth a new, interdisciplinary approach to integrate across the curriculum topics such as migration, environment sustainability, genre issues, the dialogue between culture and religion, global economy, global governance structures, climate change, human rights, and social inequities.

Global citizenship education involves three key conceptual dimensions (UNESCO 2015b):

- Cognitive: To acquire knowledge, understanding and critical thinking about global, regional, national and local issues and the interconnectedness and interdependency of different countries and populations.
- Socio-emotional: To have a sense of belonging to a common humanity, sharing values and responsibilities, empathy, solidarity and respect for differences and diversity.
- Behavioural: To act effectively and responsibly at local, national and global levels for a more peaceful and sustainable world. (15)

These dimensions are embedded in specific learning objectives to be achieved at the different educational stages, from pre-primary to upper secondary school level, through different types of teaching interventions (see UNESCO 2015b). As addressing global issues in the foreign language classroom is a way of transmitting content and teaching language simultaneously (Rascón-Moreno 2013), a growing number of experiences of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been recorded in the last years. CLIL, as a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language, has been increasingly used to promote language learning and global competences starting from relevant universal themes. Considering that both CLIL and global education reflect cross-curriculum approaches,

a mix of the two is regarded as a promising cutting-edge educational proposal among other teaching approaches (Coyle, Meyer 2021; Porto 2023; Viebrock 2015). Furthermore, CLIL is also effectively applied with minoritised indigenous languages to preserve linguistic diversity (see Menegale, Bier 2020; Banegas 2023), demonstrating that a holistic approach to ethnolinguistic vitality and intercultural citizenship may lead to inclusive and high-quality education geared towards ethnic equity.

Unquestionably, educational approaches vary across different contexts, and so do the responses of policy makers. There is, in fact, considerable dissimilarity in the way states decide to integrate educational goals within their national educational system. For this reason, the work done by intergovernmental agencies with mandate in global education policy, such as UNESCO and OECD, is fundamental to understand and monitor differences or communalities among the different countries. This continuous provision of data on the structure, finances and performance of education systems across the globe not only informs educational policy and their stakeholders, but also enables a continuous reflection on how educational output can be consolidated or improved, especially in times when digitalisation is profoundly affecting all spheres of language education.

3 The Impact of Digitalisation on Language Education

Digitalisation is significantly transforming language education, opening up new challenges and opportunities for reflection. The developments in information communication technology (ICTs), for example, have given rise to a stubborn digital divide with huge disparities of access to information within and across countries. Currently, one-third of the global population is without internet access (International Telecommunication Union 2021). On the other hand, in those parts of the world where digital tools are widely distributed and used, new opportunities but also novel threats to education have emerged. To start with, the proliferation in quantity and variety of digital written texts has rapidly changed the ways in which students read and exchange information inside and outside school. Unsurprisingly, data reports that young students' time per week spent on the Internet has enormously increased in the last few years **[fig. 1]**.

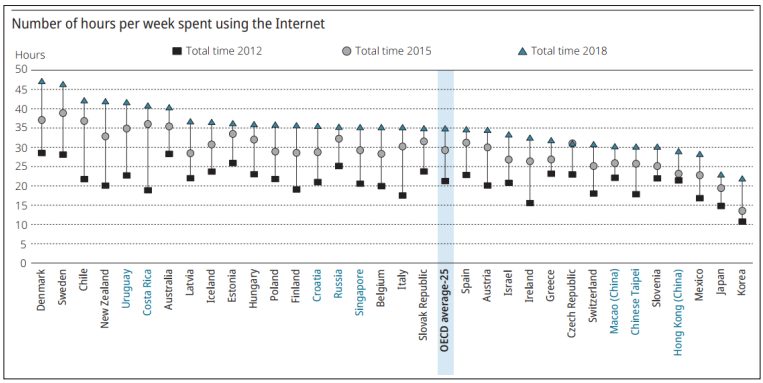

Figure 1 Time spent on the Internet in 2012, 2015 and 2018 (OECD 2021, 21)

However, the literature indicates that inequities arise from how technology is utilised rather than the frequency of its use. In fact, as affirmed by the digital divide theory (Van Deursen, Van Dijk 2014), effective ICT usage, not just access, is crucial for academic success. In other words, without well-prepared educational infrastructure (first-level digital divide), it is impossible for individuals to integrate ICT into learning and teaching. If individuals do not frequently use ICT in the classroom (second-level digital divide), technology will fail to empower them, even with fully established digital infrastructure.[1] Moreover, if teachers do not effectively teach students how to use ICT, or if students do not follow teachers' instructions, individual empowerment will be difficult to achieve (third-level digital divide) (Yu 2018).

This has prompted experts in education policy to continuously search for solutions and produce guidelines to assist educators in integrating ICTs in their work and teaching learners essential skills for 'digital' citizenship education (UNESCO 2019a; 2019b; 2024). Digital citizenship is, in fact, part of the global competence now required to understand the world and being an active and responsible member of today's informational society. According to the *Digital Citizenship Education Handbook* of the Council of Europe (2019b):

> A digital citizen is someone who, through the development of a broad range of competences, is able to actively, positively and responsibly engage in both on- and offline communities, whether

1 Interesting findings on gender, migration and social-background disparities in digital reading and navigation skills come from a recent cross-national study, which examined PISA 2012 computer-based data from sixteen European countries (Azzolini, Schizzerotto 2017).

> local, national or global. As digital technologies are disruptive in nature and constantly evolving, competence building is a lifelong process that should begin from earliest childhood at home and at school, in formal, informal and non-formal educational settings.
>
> Digital citizenship and engagement involves a wide range of activities, from creating, consuming, sharing, playing and socialising, to investigating, communicating, learning and working. Competent digital citizens are able to respond to new and everyday challenges related to learning, work, employability, leisure, inclusion and participation in society, respecting human rights and intercultural differences. (11-12)

It can be concluded that for students to achieve digital citizenship competences, some preconditions are needed, such as access to ICTs and basic functional and digital literacy skills, without which individuals are unable to access, read, write, search for information, express themselves digitally to actively engage in their community. Indeed, the array of new literacies to be incorporated into curriculum development necessitates a critical reexamination of literacy through the lens of multiliteracies. This approach underscores the importance of equipping students with a diverse set of skills that enable them to thrive in various contexts and adapt to the demands of globalisation.

4 Rethinking Literacy Through Multiliteracies

The introduction of the 'multiliteracies pedagogy' by the New London Group in 1994 advocated for the incorporation of diverse linguistic, cultural, communicative, and technological perspectives and tools to better equip students to efficiently live and communicate in today's world. Multiliteracies intersect with multimodality, as they promote the use of various modes to make meaning in different forms of expression. Indeed, the availability of different technologies and communication channels enables individuals to express themselves by employing different modes. However, the multiliteracy pedagogy goes beyond tools, procedures and micro-knowledge to embrace the process, competences and socio-meta-cognitive strategies needed to analyse, elaborate, produce and exchange meaning.

Traditionally,

> schools have emphasised teachers as experts, learners as novices and learning as the reproduction of disciplinary knowledge and skills. What is observed here is a significant pedagogical shift, in which students are positioned to think and design collectively and creatively within a community of practise. The production of new media-based texts draws upon the collective, specialist and

> transdisciplinary expertise in open-ended engagements with new media design. This is the nature of new workplaces. (Mills 2011, 2)

In this context, the emphasis on collaborative and creative practices in multiliteracy pedagogy aligns with the principles of critical literacy and critical digital literacy, which advocate for a deeper understanding of power dynamics, social justice, and the critical analysis of digital texts and contexts.

4.1 Critical Literacy and Critical Digital Literacy

In order to cope with such complex and multilayered communication, language learners need to be guided in understanding that texts are not neutral, that any form of communication is a social and political action capable of influencing people and leading to social change. This is what 'critical' literacy pursues, providing opportunities for readers to determine their ability to discern the purpose of texts as well as their capacity to identify ideologies presented in the texts. Furthermore, developing critical thinking also presupposes becoming active participants of social change, as advocated by global citizenship education (see section 2.2). However, given the extensive multimodal information that learners usually process in their daily lives, their cognitive capacity may be overwhelmed, potentially resulting in cognitive overload and consequently superficial interaction with the text (Mayer, Moreno 2003). What is needed is, therefore, the development of a 'critical digital' literacy, through practices that lead to the use and creation of digital texts that question issues of power, representation, and agency in the world and, at the same time, critically interrogate digital media and technologies themselves (Bacalja, Aguilera, Castrillon-Angel 2021).

Yet, for all this to find its place in a renewed curriculum, we need to look at the wider picture. What the digital turn has brought is much more than just technological revolution. Rather, it has put forward an actual 'anthropologic transformation', represented by a new form of human intelligence (Ferri 2013). Indeed, it appears that certain brain areas undergo more development when digital media are used regularly, activating a process that reprogrammes our minds (Koizumi 2005 cited in Ferri 2013, 76). Stemming from the 'analogic' intelligences coded by Gardner's (1983), neuroscientists have thus hypothesised the existence of a new intellectual quality, the "digital intelligence" (Ferri 2013, 78), which is the sum of social, emotional, and cognitive abilities that enable individuals to face the challenges and adapt to the demands of life in the digital world. There are research fundings showing that digital culture requires a distinct cognitive effort from our brains, as it processes hybrid codes of written

and visual languages. In a meta-analysis of more than 50 studies exploring how new media affect neural dynamics, Greenfeld (2009) concludes that every medium develops some cognitive skills at the expense of others: for example, using a computer for many hours, even for playing video games, enhances our spatial-visual intelligence and gets us accustomed to following more multiple (language) cues simultaneously. Consistent with this, it is believed that digital intelligence can positively influence other intelligences, such as social and interpersonal intelligence and linguistic intelligence.[2]

4.2 Artificial Intelligence Literacy

All this strongly affects language education today and will likely affect it in the future too. The new developments in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) make it clear to what extent we are constantly expanding our dependence on technologies and related digital literacies. Although a comprehensive definition of 'artificial intelligence' literacy is currently lacking, what is commonly acknowledged in the literature is that it presents a promising frontier in education, offering personalised learning experiences tailored to individual learners (Yi 2021). However, despite its potential benefits, challenges related to academic integrity, security and privacy concern educational stakeholders at different levels (Marsh 2023).

As to foreign language learning and teaching, although Internet applications and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) of various kinds have widely been used for several decades both inside and outside formal learning contexts, until today only a small number of products have advanced characteristics of intelligent adaptive systems. Blume et al. (2017 cited in Schmidt, Strasser 2022, 166) analysed 50 current foreign language learning programmes and showed that many of them provide inadequate feedback, offer exercises primarily focused on grammar and vocabulary practice, and often lack flexibility in exercise selection and sequencing. Individualisation and adaptivity, which require AI methods, are not yet commonly provided by most programs. In conclusion, while there is a plethora of CALL resources available, truly Intelligent CALL (ICALL) options remain scarce.

More recently, there has been widespread discussion on Generative AI and its applications (such as Bing, ChatGPT, Chatsonic, Google Gemini, Jasper, Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity, and Youchat) that involve AI systems based on Large Language Models (LLMs). These systems can generate human-like text and respond to user prompts,

2 See Ferri 2013 for further details.

creating content, engaging in conversation, and providing personalised responses. This means that, in a language learning context, they can offer dynamic, interactive, and personalised language experiences through conversational engagement and content generation. Although the positive impact of AI technologies on language learning and teaching (for a literature review see Qiao, Zhao 2023), further research is needed to better understand learner-machine interactional processes and actual overall learning achievements. Findings so far suggest improvement in pronunciation and fluency through speech recognition and editing tools, with high potential found in instant feedback. A trend of research has now moved on the use of chatbots for more personalised language learning experiences, including text-to-speech and speech-to-text conversion, pronunciation checks, translation, and conversational practice (see Zou et al. 2023).

4.3 Emotional Literacy

If we acknowledge that AI tools can support language education from many perspectives and thus deserve high consideration by curriculum developers, we must similarly acknowledge that concerns about the impact on human interaction and socialisation skills should also be carefully evaluated. Although AI can provide students with access to a wide range of information and resources, it cannot replace the advantages of conversing with a human teacher or partner. The value of human interaction in language acquisition cannot be overstated. This is confirmed by the role that interpersonal and intrapersonal skills have in the learning process, especially in language learning. In his categorisation of forms of intelligences, Gardner (1983) defined intrapersonal intelligence as the ability to understand one's own emotions, and interpersonal intelligence as the ability to have a good relationship with others. From here, Mayer and Salovey (1990) theorised the existence of an 'emotional intelligence' made of four hierarchical types of abilities: i) the ability to access or evoke feeling so as to facilitate cognitive processes, ii) the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge, iii) the ability to control emotions, and iv) the ability to nurture emotional and intellectual development. When emotional intelligence operates with an ethical compass, 'emotional' literacy is applied. We report here Steiner's (2003) definition:

> To be emotionally literate is to be able to handle emotions in a way that improves your personal power and improves the quality of life for you and – equally importantly – the quality of life for the people around you. (15)

Therefore, along with the development of knowledge, understanding, and reasoning, education aims at raising awareness of personal emotions and sense of empathy.[3] Emotional engagement and feelings play a role which is more and more central in education in general, and foreign language learning is no exception (Bigelow 2019).

In the language classroom, emotional literacy, as well as other types of the aforementioned literacies, can be encouraged through literature, which is regarded by many teachers as the possible solution to further engage students with meaningful language learning. In the following part of our contribution, we will seek to demonstrate how the use of literature in the foreign language classroom can represent a solution to combine many of the educational challenges discussed so far. The use of literature may provide students with opportunities for tackling global topics, while working on learning tasks that reshape the learning process towards knowledge creation and meaningful application, also by using multimedia and digital tools and resources that facilitate and accelerate the process of deep learning.

5 Reorienting the Role of Literature for Language Learning

After a period in which literary texts were relegated to a peripheral role, in favour of more communicative input such as dialogues and conversations (considered as more practical and connected the real-world situation language models), we have recently witnessed a "resurrection of literature as an input for language classes" (Khatib, Rezaei, Darakhshan 2011, 201). In fact, the role of texts in foreign language education for teaching literature and teaching language through literature has evolved with new facets and dimensions. Before proceeding in our reasoning, however, it is important to clarify that we are not interested in discussing approaches for teaching literature here. Instead, what will guide our examination is the intention to understand how to rethink literary competences and communication-related skills in the foreign language classroom. Our interest is therefore in literature-based language teaching and learning rather than literature education, although certain goals and applications of the two areas certainly overlap.

The use of literary texts in language learning has changed significantly in several ways, beginning with their multimodal nature. Literary texts are now frequently presented in various formats, including digital editions, audiobooks, and interactive e-books, which enable learners to engage with the material through multiple sensory

3 See the three dimensions of global citizenship education in section 2.2.

modalities and learning styles. A substantial body of literature has emerged regarding the cross-platform characteristics of contemporary narratives, transmedia navigation, and storytelling.[4] Additionally, there is extensive research on the multimodal and participatory ways in which young people engage with and create various types of texts, especially in digital formats (see Beavis 2013). However, while literary texts are viewed as having the potential to encourage independent thinking, interpretation, and creativity, younger students need texts that are motivating, accessible, and relevant to their lives to engage effectively. This raises their involvement with the narrative, their emotional response, and, at the same time, their language competence, particularly if sustained by means of interesting and motivating activities that improve the text experience (Henning 1993 cited in Di Martino, Di Sabato 2014, 5). Literary texts in a foreign language (as in L1) have the potential to promote emotional skills by offering indirect emotional experiences that shape the brain circuits involved in empathy (Ghosn 2001). This is because literature provides a rich array of examples of emotional life, with authors capturing emotions that resonate across generations of learners (Oatley 2004 cited in Roohani 2009, 41).

This said, it is evident that written texts alone do not convey full meaning to the reader; instead, the reader interprets them through the lens of their background information, knowledge, emotions, and culture, or schemata, which impart different meanings to the text. This means that what is crucial to make the reading experience meaningful is, first, aligning to students' reading preferences and habits, and second, developing mediation competences. These two aspects will be discussed further below.

5.1 Students' Reading Preferences

One way to foster students' interest in reading in the foreign language is to allow them to select their own text, the content, level of difficulty, length and, considering technological developments, the format too. "Students who choose their own texts are, in effect, also providing their own appropriate background knowledge for understanding the text" (Carrell, Eisterhold 1983, 567). Indeed, research has widely supported the theory that having autonomy to choose materials according to interest levels is likely to positively influence language learning in several ways (see Green, Christopher, Lam 1997; Menegale 2019; Wolf 2013). Fazzi's (2023) analysis of recent studies on EFL students' reading preferences reports that learners engage

4 For references see Fazzi, Da Lio, Guzzon, *infra*; Fina, Fazzi, Da Lio, *infra*; Haring, *infra*.

in reading both inside and outside the classroom, that they find more accessible and appealing literature with a teenage narrator or teenager characters, that (if they have the option) they read both digitally and on paper, and that print and digital literacies are deeply intertwined in their life. Furthermore, they find pleasure in discussing what they have read with friends and in using social media platforms to discover new books and gather information about them. This data is consistent with recent PISA findings (OECD 2021) on L1 reading preferences and habits. Just to cite a few:

- Students who reported reading books more often in paper than digital format perform better in reading and spend more time reading for enjoyment in all participating countries.
- Compared to students who rarely or never read books, digital-book readers across OECD countries read for enjoyment about 3 hours more a week, print-book readers about 4, and those who balance both formats about 5 hours or more a week after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic background and gender. (15)

In order to cultivate a love for reading in students, the curriculum should embrace a wide range of works, formats, and genres that students find engaging, rather than solely relying on classic literary works. In the same line, a diverse mixture of media and modes of communication should be contemplated. To wisely accompany this change, systematic research is needed on how new texts and topics such as global citizenship, migration, human rights, and sustainability impact on teaching language through literature. Young adult readers are attracted by texts that mirror the realities of their lives, as long as false optimism and didacticism are avoided (Too 2017), and biased views or force-feeding opinions are eschewed (Divéki 2020). These preferences find evidence in several studies. Students expressed appreciation for texts addressing issues that directly or indirectly impacted them, as, for instance, mental health (Fazzi 2023; Jensen 2018; Manutscheri 2021) – a problem that has precipitously exploded amongst adolescents around the world after the COVID-19 pandemic (Pieh et al. 2021). In her study on EFL adolescents' reading habits, Fazzi (2023) also found that, while interest in topics such as racism and global conflicts was evident, LGBTQ+ issues received mixed reactions. Commenting on the list of young adult literature books proposed by the researcher, students reported preferring more implicit approaches to sensitive themes such queering, rejecting stereotypical or explicit portrayals.

Thus, if novels are to be used to foster the agenda for global competences, as also UNESCO (2014) points, text selection and teaching methods should aim at addressing controversial issues in a

multidimensional, critical, and unbiased manner. Especially when targeting younger learners, literature-based language teaching and learning is expected to support students in increasing their language proficiency and, at the same time, in identifying multiple and alternatives perspectives on a subject, developing their critical and intercultural skills which are part of global competence (Divéki, Pereszlényi 2019, 71). To help teachers integrate all this in their lessons, some contribution may come from the interpretation of 'mediation' as recently proposed by the Council of Europe (2020).

5.2 Literature and Mediation Competences

The latest improvements formulated by the Council of Europe to its well-known first version of CEFR (CoE 2001), all included in the Compendium Volume (CV) (CoE 2020), explicitly consider aesthetic and literary aims in language education and propose scales and descriptors for them. Being our interest here to focus on the literature as a language learning opportunity, tools like these proposed by the Council of Europe are extremely relevant to understand the potential of literature as a medium or a method of language instruction and, at the same time, a way to promote critical thinking, empathy and intercultural knowledge and awareness.

More precisely, in the CEFR-CV the use of literature is seen as beneficial to the development of mediation competences. Mediation is, in fact, one of the four modes of communication identified in the CEFR, together with reception, production, and interaction. While interaction stresses the social use of language, mediation encompasses and goes beyond that by focusing on the construction of new meaning (in the sense of new understanding, new knowledge, new concepts) and/or enabling communication beyond linguistic or cultural barriers. Both types of mediation rely on collaborative processes (CoE 2020). While in the first version of CEFR mediation was presented as a technical facilitation of communication involving two languages, that approach has been notably extended in the CEFR-CV. More consideration has been given to plurilingualism and to learner's capacity to use all the varied communicative resources that characterise their linguistic repertoire to construct new meanings. For this purpose, mediation tasks may ask students to draw information from texts that combine multiple modes, such as digital texts, videos, blogs, etc., to produce multimodal texts in the foreign language on various topics, again working across languages and/or different types of texts (CoE 2023). Evidently, mediation combines languages at different levels with the aim of softening linguistic and cultural gaps in the communication process.

> Cross-linguistic and cross-modal mediation, in particular, inevitably involve social and cultural competence as well as plurilingual competence. This emphasises the fact that one cannot in practice completely separate one type of mediation from another. (CoE 2020, 91)

Yet, mediation is not only a matter of doing something but also of how somebody does it. Indeed, the new approach to mediation now explicitly encompasses a dimension related to a personal quality:

> A person who engages in mediation activity needs to have a well-developed emotional intelligence, or an openness to develop it, in order to have sufficient empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation. (CoE 2020, 91)

In other words, emotional intelligence is seen as a "prerequisite" of mediation processes (Leung 2022, 83). To understand to what extent emotional intelligence is considered in the level descriptors and assessed in the 'can-do statements', Leung analyses the occurrence of the terms 'emotion' and 'emotional' throughout the CEFR-CV. Apart from two occurrences found in passages where the term is used to explain its meaning, the other six mentions appear in connection with one of the three new scales that regard the use of literature for language learning. The three scales of the CEFR-CV relevant to literature are (CoE 2020):

- Reading as a leisure activity (65),
- Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature) (116), and
- Analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature). (117)

While the first scale appears among reception activities (specifically, in the 'reading comprehension' section), the second and the third pertain to mediation activities (specifically, those regarding 'mediating a text') and relate to learners' interaction with a creative text, with 'can do statements' such as 'can relate', 'can explain', 'can describe', 'can critically appraise', and 'can evaluate'. Emotional intelligence has been found to be explicitly related to the second scale, "Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature)". In explaining how these two mediation scales were conceptualised, North and Piccardo (2016, 20) wrote:

> There was some discussion as to whether one should regard expressing reactions to literature as mediation. Clearly one mediates when explaining or giving a view on a work to another person.

> Because responses to and criticism of literature was at the borders of the concept of mediation developing in the project, however, it was decided to put descriptors for this area under 'Mediating a text' together with Listening and Note-taking.

Alter and Ratheiser (2019) stress that these two literature-related mediation scales delve into the essence of exploring literary works as they are: creative texts written not only to inform but also to entertain, to deal with new realms, to evoke imagery through language, to provoke thought, and much more.

> Also, in many cases, when we use language it is not just to communicate a message, but rather to develop an idea through what is often called 'languaging' (talking the idea through and hence articulating the thoughts) or to facilitate understanding and communication. Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature) reflects the approach taken in school sectors and in adult reading circles. The scale focuses on expression of the effect a work of literature has on the user/learner as an individual. Analysis and criticism of creative texts, (including literature) represents the approach more common at an upper secondary and university level. It concerns more formal, intellectual reactions. Aspects analysed include the significance of events in a novel, treatment of the same themes in different works and other links between them; the extent to which a work follows conventions, and more global evaluation of the work as a whole. (CoE 2020, 35)

To effectively leverage literature for creative purposes, it is important to create a context in which young people "expect to be actively involved in the textual, digital world, as both consumers and producers" – essentially as "readers/viewers/players and creators" (Beavis 2013, 245). This can be achieved by involving students in literature-based digital mediation tasks.

5.3 Engaging Students Through Literature-Based Digital Mediation Tasks

Narrative texts may offer the three basic conditions for language learning set forth by Willis (1996), which are exposure, use, and motivation: by incorporating stories into foreign language classrooms, students are exposed to the language, practise language usage, and find motivation through the interest and curiosity that narrative texts inspire (Wajnryb 2003).

Nonetheless, students' levels of motivation and imagination vary, and many will certainly benefit from activities aimed at raising

empathy towards the characters or the situations narrated in the stories. An important question of recent research has been to understand to what extent digital reading experiences are different from print reading practices from a cognitive, social and emotional point of view. Taking a step further, some scholars are studying the types of interactional and mediation processes (reader with text and reader with other readers) promoted through reading happening on digital social platforms. In fact, given that reading increasingly occurs on online platforms, especially for younger generations, a lens has been put on how readers connect over and in what they read, and how they interact and form communities around texts. According to Zhu et al. (2020), a way to foster the potential of digital social reading in the language classroom is to ask learners to collaborate to critique literary texts, highlight important points, ask questions, organise ideas, predict, express opinions, save instances of grammar for practice, connect to external sources, link text to their own lives, consider other viewpoints, and interact with peers, teachers, and others (see the pedagogical experimentations of digital social reading practice reported in Fazzi, Da Lio, Guzzon, *infra*). In a similar line, other studies have concentrated on how multimodal production (e.g., digital storytelling) in response to literature can be a logical, subsequent learning phase of the reading process, in that it supports language students' development of mediation skills, creativity and critical thinking (Horne 2021; Fina, Fazzi, Da Lio, *infra*; Haring, *infra*; Lugossy et al., *infra*).

Despite the clear potential of literature-based digital mediation tasks to enhance foreign language learning together with a long list of global competence-related skills and literacies, their consideration in pedagogical manuals and handbooks is still very limited. The CEFR-CV itself, although recognising novels, short stories or biographies as types of texts to be mastered by language learners at some proficiency levels and through different kinds of communication modes, does not specify in what ways they can be integrated into an 'action-oriented approach' (Piccardo, North 2019). The feeling is that the "resurrection of literature as an input for language classes" (Khatib, Rezaei, Darakhshan 2011, 201, see above) is not yet fully accomplished or, as we would prefer to believe, that the CEFR is a work-in progress developmental project open to further improvements and that in a recent future action-oriented approach will also consider literary text-based tasks.

6 Concluding Remarks and Open Issues for Research

Provokingly, Goldwin-Jones (2019) depicts three scenarios for the future of language learning. In the first, language learning is no longer needed, as technological advancements will bring the quality of machine translations and other mediation tools to such a high quality that the convenience of using them will raise doubts about the practical necessity of learning additional languages. In the second scenario, language learning is needed, but not formal instruction: in fact, the abundance, affordability, and appeal characterising today's multilingual digital resources (e.g., audio-video streaming) and online communities (e.g., social media platforms, online gaming) might obviate the necessity to learn a foreign language in a classroom setting. In this case, language learning would occur, even unintentionally, through authentic use or communication practice. The third scenario envisioned for the future of language learning entails a mix of formal instruction with online resources, in line with the practices of the flipped classroom or blended learning. Goldwin-Jones goes on further specifying how the balance of instructed and self-regulated learning may be determined considering the level of learning autonomy possessed by language learners and the extent of availability of digital tools and resources. This last scenario is, overall, the most credible.

Indeed, a tailored combination of formal and informal learning opportunities aligns with the challenges connected to the diverse 'educational turns' discussed in this paper, namely, the 'multilingual turn', the 'digital turn', the 'multiliteracy turn', and the 'emotional turn'. To make hybrid settings possible, the first aspect to consider is the extent to which the implementation of a comprehensive language learning system is achievable, assessing both technological feasibility and teacher readiness. Data and trends indicate that educational institutions worldwide are increasingly adopting hybrid learning models to meet the demand for flexible learning options. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated this process, prompting increased investments in technological infrastructure to support the development of online learning platforms. However, data also reveal that teachers often lack the necessary digital competences, and both initial and in-service teacher professional development programmes generally do not include standardised competence frameworks (OECD 2023). The scenario is further complicated by the dynamic and evolving nature of hybrid language learning environments, which require continuous updates to digital knowledge and adaptation of curricular approaches and materials.

Assuming that the educational system will manage to find proper and systematic solutions to these weaknesses, another critical consideration pertains to the integration of various types of input, tools

and settings within a comprehensive language learning system. This integration seeks to make foreign language learning more intrinsically meaningful for students and to promote their agency and autonomy in language learning. In the twenty-first century, to be regarded as 'meaningful', language education should emphasise the skills needed for the future workplace (e.g., digital literacies, critical thinking skills, and collaboration skills) as well as the ways of living in society and as an individual (e.g., personal wellbeing, citizenship, and social awareness) (Mercer et al. 2018). From a language ecological perspective, this implies redesigning tomorrow's language learning environments, exploring new relations among advancing technologies, classroom spaces, and students' multilingual and multimodal forms of communication (Mills 2011), also looking at experiences occurring in leisure time and at home. Further research is needed to increase awareness among policy makers, curriculum developers, teachers, and students of how learners use language learning environments outside school, the types of interactions and relations they establish with and across different learning settings, and the way they exploit the human and non-human resources (Benson 2022), especially in light of recent AI developments.

To date, many of the global challenges that have characterised these 'turns' in language education have found only partial solutions. Curricula proposals and promising practices that have been put forward in these last years by key stakeholders are often not integrated into comprehensive curricula review processes. Nonetheless, if we consider global citizenship and multiliteracies as goals for foreign language learning, we cannot ignore the significant inequity in the distribution of environmental resources for language learning, both inside and outside the classroom. This inevitably raises political and economic questions beyond language-related challenges, especially when considering major/international and minor/regional languages in the digital era. All things considered, it appears that the background and foreground of our scenario for the future of language learning still need to be harmonised.

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