

General Perspectives on Confidence and Trust Online and Offline

Confidence and Trust in Online Academic Discourse: Integrating New Technologies into Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This contribution summarises the experience gained during the Covid-19 pandemic at international universities in online teaching and learning. It highlights the importance of the central concepts confidence and trust on all levels: the confidence teachers had to gain to “go online” all of a sudden in an emergency situation as well as the confidence students needed to cope with technology, teacher and content as well as the trust students, teachers and administrators had to learn. The general focus is on the importance the pandemic had for strengthening modern concepts of (collective) learning and on the technological innovation push that resulted in the (forced) integration of remote and (a)synchronous learning into everyday teaching and learning practices. The linguistic focus is on linguistic and semiotic clues that may contribute to successful language learning in new technology contexts. Finally, the contribution gives an outlook on the influence of the latest innovation in language learning – chatbots integrating large language models like ChatGPT – and their possible uses as planner, assistant, and agent.

Keywords: social perception, digital tools, innovation, e-learning, technologies

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 forced educational institutions worldwide to change into emergency remote mode (cf. e.g., World Health Organization 2021; German Rectors’ Conference press releases 2020-2022). Foreign language teachers and learners had always understood that their work could have the best effect in small intensive face-to-face (F2F) interaction. Now this direct human interaction was abruptly made impossible, which was particularly hard for language teachers who felt that their routine was spoilt by something unnatural.

However, this contribution argues that professional communication had moved already in the digital direction before the pandemic and made remote online collaboration only natural: online language tools like Zoom for communication, Google Docs for collaborative writing, and DeepL for translation had made their way into modern language services earlier on. Thus, a variety of digital tools and

enough practical examples of remote online interaction was available for language teachers and learners who looked around or who established a good professional network to cope with the unprecedented challenges. Although the strain on administrators, teachers and students should not be underestimated, many were ultimately able to master the challenges of forced remote teaching and learning despite technical difficulties, as described in a global comparison in Radić et al. (2021). Thus, the forced remote online academic discourse during the pandemic empowered learners to cope with the rapidly changing digital contexts and tools of modern professional (computer-mediated) communication and even helped build up a certain resilience for future challenges (cf. Wuest & Subramaniam 2021).

2. Useful E-Learning Concepts

The transition to remote online learning was probably comparatively easy for foreign language teachers and learners who were accustomed in theory and practice to certain e-Learning concepts that had developed in the 1960s but gained momentum in the 1990s with the advent of the World-Wide Web (Warschauer 1996). Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is well known under various names, from Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Computer-Aided (Language) Instruction (CALI), etc.

Blended learning, the combination of F2F direct instruction and remote mode, has been established as a useful variation for a long time (cf. Whitelock & Jelfs 2003, but also the critique in Oliver & Trigwell 2005). When teachers and students have had an opportunity to develop it in personal F2F classes before going online, this is the best basis of confidence and trust in online teaching afterwards.

Flipped classroom concepts have been practised to encourage students to study texts individually first to save valuable class time and bring the more interesting discussion points to the classroom afterwards (see Akçayır & Akçayır 2018). Again, learners must have enough confidence to work with complex texts individually and teachers must trust them to prepare for the F2F components, so that a fruitful discussion is possible.

Task-based learning has included real-life tasks that require individual attention beyond the usual classwork in books (cf. the review in Lai & Li 2011). This comprises a wide variety of choices that can also be made available to learners in an online learning platform like Moodle.

Personalised learning has been a trend in language teaching that can be particularly fruitfully pursued in asynchronous use of online materials. The flexibility of learning and individualisation according to learning styles can be implemented e.g. in the choice of study materials like personalised articles (Hsieh et al. 2012).

Gamification of language materials has followed general online trends and can increase the interaction and motivation of individual learning enormously. The most commonly applied gamification elements have been shown to be feedback, challenges, points, rewards, and leader boards for competition (Dehghanzadeh et al. 2021).

The autonomous learner has been a central point of discussion in foreign language learning for decades (e.g., Gathercole 1990). As autonomous learners are self-motivated and appreciate flexibility, they can choose tasks from a variety offered on a learning platform (like videos, texts, quizzes, discussions on Moodle) and control their learning progress. The confidence and pride of being able to control their own learning is the best starting point for success in their own learning style according to their personal needs and preferences (Susanti, Rachmajanti & Mustofa 2023).

In the following section, I focus on instructional discourse, although this is only a small part of academic discourse (cf. Schmied 2015), which also includes research discourse, where online communication has been established before and where confidence and trust are important in different ways. The case of online exams, however, deserves a special mention because it is discussed not only in teaching contexts, but also in psychological and legal contexts, which are extremely important here (e.g., online anxiety or the integrity of the exams). Most language teachers had not focused on online testing in their classes, since they preferred to confine this potentially threatening situation to within their usual teaching environment. They did not want to increase their learners' anxiety unnecessarily and wanted to be available as resource persons in case candidates needed help or asked questions, which is much easier in the familiar personal atmosphere of a classroom than online. Moreover, remote online testing opens more opportunities for cheating which can be avoided by exam formats aiming at testing understanding, transfer, and creativity.

3. Confidence Online

3.1. Teacher Perspectives

Although foreign language teachers were forced to go online during the pandemic, many noticed that some learning activities have been more successful online than expected and even than in F2F classes generally. The awareness of such discoveries should make teachers proud of their achievements and strengthen their confidence in their teaching in general and their online teaching in particular (Swanson 2014).

A special advantage of online teaching are breakout rooms because they can be arranged quickly and allow many learners to disappear into smaller groups where interaction may be less intimidating. Since group work is not only an established teaching activity, but also a modern requirement in many workplaces, this brings the teaching world closer to the working reality, which is becoming more and more digital and collaborative anyway. Collaborative tools like Padlet for brainstorming and Google Docs for writing and editing a text are common outside of language classrooms and universities today.

For many teachers, the online tools of polls and quizzes are welcome quick and easy ways to check whether learners are still following or have understood the lesson up to a particular point, which in turn allows them to continue confidently. Many quiz platforms like *Kahoot* and *arsnova* also involve gamification elements

such as feedback, points, nicknames, and competition between the [anonymised] students.

Generally, many sustainable and reusable materials (e.g., video lectures and tutorials) make the work of teachers easier in routine teaching. In all these cases, teachers need personalised professional learning that builds their confidence in integrating (preferably open-source) technology into all aspects of their work.

3.2. Learner Perspectives

For students, online meetings may be intimidating, due to the technology, the online view into their private homes, including their dress and general appearance, and because they feel more exposed in online public than in a classroom. Although confidence is an issue everywhere (Xu 2011), the importance to overcome learning anxiety was particularly obvious during the first stages of remote online learning, when the technology might have been as insecure as the user. However, overcoming challenges is fulfilling and helps with gaining confidence in an online environment as well as in a foreign language.

The technology naturally takes time to get used to and some practice, before an online lesson can be mastered smoothly and with confidence. This includes sound and camera checks and the choice of the preferred background image or personal environment, more or less blurred. The procedures to join online meetings, to mute and unmute microphones and to share screens along with all the other aspects of collaborative learning and interaction must become routine so that learners can concentrate on the content of the lesson. Individual skills training depends on the specific online class, but concentrating on the online work needs some practice. The listening skills and concentrated attention can easily be practiced using educational YouTube videos or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), the active participation can be encouraged by asking questions of clarification, expansion or application, etc. The chat is usually a part of online teaching welcomed by the students and although it may split the attention between the presentation and the chat, it reduces the hurdle of joining via microphone for small interventions. An even more minimalistic reaction option are the “status” options such as clapping or thumbs up/down. For student collaboration, common platforms like Zoom or BigBlueButton also provide whiteboards and polls that can be used to create mindmaps and tests (see Kohnke & Moorhouse 2022), and to make quick democratic decisions. Less confident students may practice their skills in video lectures, which are easy to stop and replay and allow them more time to take notes. Many online interactions are not much different from those in the classroom, although the image in the camera frame highlights the learner image and this may make self-conscious students insecure – encouragement by teachers and peers will often help in the course of time.

Some students may prefer to be able to choose their interaction style, if they are too shy to speak, they can comment in the chat box, etc. In some cases, they can exchange ideas with friendly peers directly before going public in the virtual

classroom. Still, oral participation should be encouraged as articulation conveying confidence and trust is a useful professional skill in on- and off-line communication.

Teachers can help learners to gain confidence by helping them to see their progress, empowering them with different online learning strategies, and giving them the autonomy they want or need. This also includes the trust that learners' efforts are appreciated and they do not have to be perfect to gain positive feedback. Praise and criticism can be usefully expressed through concession, as is often done in other genres like reviews (Schmied 2021a).

Finally, the opportunities of asynchronous learning have to be emphasised, as they are frequently mentioned by students. The advantages of learning at one's own pace in one's own best learning time and environment have been well-known for a long time – thus teachers should support confident asynchronous learning, although it is always based on the trust that teachers should find normal with respect to their students.

4. Trust Online

4.1. Teacher Perspectives

Although teachers usually have to trust their students, they can make sure they are attentive listeners and active participants. Internet connectivity may be a problem for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but insufficient connectivity may also be used as an excuse to switch off cameras, something which is originally based on cultural and social backgrounds – and teachers have to know the backgrounds of their students when working in such contexts. In Cranfield et al. (2021), almost all students did not turn their cameras on, but specifically those from Wales and Hungary, which are countries higher on the individualistic dimension. Therefore teachers have to explain the benefits of multimodal chats including all the non-verbal communication of face, gesture and head or body movements that make student interaction with teachers and peers more personal. This includes encouraging students to respect each other's privacy and personal space to create a safe and respectful environment. Thus online instruction makes participants aware that openness and trust are the natural basis for good and efficient communication and education. Of course, teachers also have to acknowledge individual concerns and address them respectfully.

A special advantage of modern international online teaching is to bring experts from various academic backgrounds into the virtual classroom, which would never have been possible in the traditional classroom, because it would be ineffective in terms of time and expenses. Teachers do not have to fear that renowned colleagues might undermine their reputation or intimidate their students.

Finally, new ways of virtual cultural immersion are possible, not only interaction with native speakers in their cultural environment, but also group and personal discussions (e.g., after participating in virtual tours of cultural landmarks and “visiting” places online) provide students with a more authentic and immersive and hence more effective learning experience.

4.2. Learner Perspectives

From a learner perspective, trust may mean increased autonomy where students can choose their own topics and online interaction modes, their own learning materials and even their own learning plans. This personalised mode is a great advantage of online learning and should be encouraged by respecting learners' choices in terms of learning objectives, pace, and times. Teachers only provide a safe and supportive learning environment where learners feel free, comfortable and confident and even dare to ask questions or try answers when they are not sure, but take the risk of making mistakes – and learn from them. Sometimes this is even easier online than when the teacher's presence is felt in the room.

What the teacher is always needed for is the individual constructive feedback that appreciates all efforts and focuses on learners' strengths and areas of improvement. Whereas positive feedback strengthens learners' confidence and encourages learning even when it means taking risks, negative feedback may damage their self-esteem and confidence. A useful way to provide constructive criticism is to concede the "bad news" and offer suggestions for improvement (Schmied 2021a). Learners must be given evidence that they can trust their teachers to notice and even celebrate their achievements however small they may be. Thus pride is added to the frequently examined emotions of enjoyment and anxiety in language learning. Although all these conventions are well known from traditional teaching and learning, they have to be transferred to the online mode and this is not automatic. The temptation for students to disappear in cyberspace is real, therefore, at least initially, remote online learning always requires special awareness of teachers to create motivation, interaction and finally language learning in a new, but nowadays increasingly commonplace mode.

5. Confidence and Trust in Instructional Discourse Online

While many academic disciplines are concerned with the importance of confidence and trust and how to increase these in human interaction (e.g., psychology or law, Blomqvist 1997). The focus here is on the contribution that language approaches can make in instructional discourse, as a major component of academic discourse (cf. 6 below).

Many linguistic and semiotic signals can be used to increase confidence and trust in online instructional discourse. The familiar face of the teacher is always a good starting point – and should encourage students to switch on their cameras, too. Academic discussions on switching on microphones and cameras have often not based on the confidence and trust that should be the basis of a cooperative modern learning atmosphere (Mpungose 2021).

As with all online communication, instructional discourse is prone to noise, and this is why the basic elements of successful communication have to be considered: Language usage needs to be clear and appropriate for the students' level, and expectations of response and interaction have to be stated explicitly at the very beginning. As students may be particularly sensitive in online contexts, teachers

must be particularly aware of showing respect for individual cultural and linguistic backgrounds, even if this goes against best teaching conditions. Thus some may avoid eye contact, others may use many honorifics and may not be able to address problems directly, and still others may find multimodal communication through gestures exaggerated. Positive feedback is even more important than usual to encourage learners to engage and contribute. In difficult contexts, it is particularly important to show empathy with students. Their efforts are always appreciated, even if their contributions are not perfect. Thus, automated teaching conventions may have to be transferred consciously to the online mode. This may be seen as a case of intentional design, where the learners' interaction is constantly monitored, and this means catering for individual differences of learners. For example, for those preferring authority and directness, instructions should not be made unnecessarily polite, as this might be perceived as negative face threat (Brown & Levinson 1987); for those preferring autonomy, teacher interventions should be restricted to guiding learners to suitable resources and discussion topics.

The style of remote online instruction is not only determined by technical affordances, but also by academic discourse features. In particular, many types of engagement markers can be used to initiate and maintain fruitful academic interaction: direct address (even polite imperatives) can be used to ensure that silent attendees take part actively, appeals to shared knowledge create a community of discourse, personal asides establish a social bond, rhetorical questions encourage learners to think independently, etc. All that is good for F2F interaction is even more important in remote online interaction, as interactive signals have to help bridge the physical distance.

6. Confidence and Trust in Remote Online Examinations and Unsupervised Writing

Instructional discourse is not the only element of academic discourse “disrupted” by the pandemic – research output and student literacy were also affected, but to a smaller extent. Some genres may even have become easier, like taking online lecture notes if the lecture is available online and asynchronous work is possible, which is greatly appreciated by students who prefer to work at their own pace, at their best working time and in their best working environment. However, a great problem during the pandemic were tests that could not be organised in the usual way, whereby all students are present to take the final course or even degree exam at the same time under the same exam conditions with their familiar teachers invigilating them. Since examinations are so important, they also have a legal component. Although there was no alternative to remote online examinations at the height of the pandemic, it was practically impossible to provide the same conditions for all test participants in remote mode. The main problems were not only differences in connectivity and comparability, but the fact that students may not have been used to such exam types, hence the usual confidence and honesty conventions had been insufficiently trained. For the ordinary language teacher, online exam proctoring was practically impossible and when administrations

suggested surveillance tools they were often not in conformity with European (Union) privacy regulations (Barrio 2022).

A specific problem of traditional language tests was the integrity of the assessment through the use of online resources and tools (like collocation dictionaries and DeepL). Nowadays so many language tools are available online that restricting their use in the classroom has become unrealistic when they are all normal or even professional usage in modern language services.

The remote testing problem was, of course, aggravated since often only the most important tests were conducted online and some traditional forms of language skills testing cannot be transferred to remote mode easily, when they require personal interaction, like role plays (Akimov & Malin 2020).

Unfortunately, the problem of cheating and test fraud can hardly be solved by restrictive online proctoring. If candidates' desktop activity, webcam video, and audio are monitored not by a human but by proctoring software that sends the data to an external proctoring service to review, this is hardly within the limits of European data protection regulations. The development of online proctoring software is remarkably fast, but the best way to avoid all these problems is still to set exams that convince the learner that they are a useful step in both, their learning plan and achieving their personal academic and career goals. Teachers have to trust that their students actually want to learn online and not waste their energy avoiding to learn and have to design exams aiming at application and transfer skills that cannot be found in previous exams easily.

7. Outlook: Trust in Using Large Language Models like ChatGPT

The development of language tools has received great popular attention recently and many commentators consider it a “game changer”. So-called large language models are being developed and integrated in many other online tools, so that so far it is difficult to predict their impact in general and on foreign language teaching and learning in particular. Nevertheless, it is worth discussing recent developments in this context, because trust is a key element in popular and academic discourse.

Towards the end of 2022, a new tool created heated discussions in many educational institutions: ChatGPT 3 became openly available, a chatbot that allowed practically everyone (who registered and was not held up by server overload) to type short instructions, the so-called prompts, and to receive automatic output that surprised almost everyone. Users have to pay special attention to the formulation of the prompts, as prompt writing in the “internal” language of GPT is a skill which has already created new jobs. The current (May 2023) version “GPT-4, or Generative Pre-trained Transformer 4, is a natural language processing (NLP) system developed by OpenAI for language understanding. It is based on transformer technology and uses a combination of deep learning and statistical methods to generate high-quality text” (Frąckiewicz 2023). Obviously, the tool is so complex that it can be used in many ways in language teaching and learning. The public discourse on ChatGPT on social media like Twitter has been shown to be predominantly positive, yet still causing some

ethical concerns (Tilli et al. 2023). For many users, it came as a surprise that these chatbots using large language models were able to process input texts and generate output predictions which looked so professional, that it has sparked an enormous academic and popular debate on the dangers of artificial intelligence as a whole. This “authentic” “natural” language impression (!) raises fundamental questions, which cannot be discussed in this context.

The debate in international journals has developed quickly, and publishers like Elsevier have already included a “Declaration on generative AI in scientific writing” in their journal guidelines. Quick SWOT analyses (like Farrokhnia et al. 2023) have appeared to discuss pros and cons and offer usage recommendations.

The focal point in our context is that this advanced tool requires trust on several levels to be used effectively. We are not discussing the legal aspects here where problems of honesty and plagiarism prevent us from using it in remote online academic discourse. We are not discussing the fake aspects, where references are “created” or rather “hallucinated” that look extremely plausible, but simply do not exist¹. We are not discussing aspects of testing, where GPT forces us to give up traditional routines of asking students to reproduce information without applying it to individual knowledge production. We are not even discussing the many fruitful usages, where GPT could be used for brainstorming when writing an article on online academic discourse. As the general risks of “Stochastic Parrots” have been discussed already (e.g., Bender et al. 2021), we can only touch on three aspects that illustrate the wide range of applications of GPT in language teaching and learning.

7.1. ChatGPT as a Curriculum, Course and Lesson Planer

Since there are so many courses available on the internet, it is not surprising that ChatGPT can summarise suitable courses based on its training data in the offline version and based on web data in the online version, leaving teachers the work of selecting the most appropriate for their learners and learning objectives. Trust in the quality of plans depends usually on the reputation of the institution or teacher. Then a well-designed curriculum ensures a comprehensive coverage of all necessary aspects, skills and applications of a foreign language. With sophisticated input elaboration, ChatGPT also generates student assignments (e.g., homework, presentations) and the weights of their grades, which may be appreciated by teachers who find these uninspiring parts of course planning.

From a language skills perspective, chatbot usages can be included in traditional language classes in different ways:

¹ GPT-4, which is available as a paid version at the time of writing, performs better than GPT-3 on a lot of benchmarks and has reduced the number of hallucinations, but has not eliminated them completely (Awan 2023). Future improvements will reduce these problems further, however the trust in good-looking references should never go too far and diligent internet checking is an indispensable virtue of modern scholarship. Furthermore, GPT-4 is being integrated more and more in online courses or MOOCs like Khan Academy <https://www.makeuseof.com/apps-integrate-use-gpt4/>

Writing skills have profited from online resources like dictionary and thesaurus, grammar and spell-checkers for a long time. Now the more complex perspectives, like the critical review of idiomaticity and style become more prominent. The well-known problems of cultural bias in technology are crucial in academic discourse and the critical awareness of students can be trained by prompting different responses to similar questions. Confidence in verification skills is necessary to balance the temptation of uncertainty to trust agents (see Schmied 2022).

Reading skills are often neglected in traditional teaching. But in a flipped classroom approach, valuable classroom interaction time can be saved for the more complex and crucial critical reading skills. GPT can support the development of reading habits by offering (hopefully or regrettably) the same content in different forms or genres. Asking GPT to summarise long texts supports effective scanning of texts, asking it to explain technical or complex passages helps to understand difficult passages, asking it to generate exercises helps to check reading comprehension, etc.

Listening to videos and podcasts is easy for learners today as all possible topics are available on the internet and can be suggested by ChatGPT. For written texts, ChatGPT has a “voice master”, which allows learners to enjoy simple types of texts without having to look at the screen or helps them to understand complex types, also with additional comprehension support from the screen.

Speaking skills may be more challenging for the individual, but for group discussions and intercultural international communication all online tools are now available easily where communication software is installed and can be used by everyone in all modern internet contexts. For pronunciation, there are new AI-powered apps like *sylby*, and GPT is being integrated in other language learning apps like *Duolingo*. Confidence and trust in these opportunities must be based on detailed knowledge and self-training in the field.

Finally, it must be emphasised that online technologies are already used in professional real-life communication today, so that integrating them into online language learning is a good preparation for life after studies.

7.2. ChatGPT as Teacher Support or Teaching Assistant

For critical and enterprising teachers, ChatGPT can be an excellent time-saving device when preparing their teaching materials: It creates complete texts on a specific topic and that will always include aspects a teacher would have included anyway, but also aspects that even experienced teachers might have neglected – and all of this visibly in “no time”. It also creates corresponding comprehension questions and word lists or semantic groups (like a traditional thesaurus) that can be used in vocabulary training, even with explanations at the specific CEFL level of the learner.

For, large language systems are trained to be style-sensitive and can be prompted to supply texts according to CEFL levels, so that scaffolded texts are possible (e.g., first 500 words on A2 and then 600 words on B1 level on the same