

## 1 Introduction

This Element is intended for language teachers, future language teachers, and teacher trainers. Its recommendations for using technology are based on research and the text will refer to research findings frequently. It will also make the claim that research and its theoretical basis are important for language teaching. However, it is mainly concerned with pedagogy and ways to make online teaching successful.

This first section will start with suggestions on how this Element can be used and how it can be useful. I will then talk about the style used here and in the other parts of the Element, and describe some of the purposes of its features, such as tasks and examples. This is followed by an outlook of all chapters. The Introduction will finish with some explanations and definitions. A glossary of terms used in this Element can be found at the end.

### 1.1 Using This Element

There are different ways to access this Element – different pathways through the material.

It can work as a thorough grounding for teacher trainees and people interested in the foundations of online language learning. This pathway starts with the theoretical approach, with a discussion of various learning theories and how they fit with language learning and with online language teaching. Readers taking this path might want to skip the practical tasks at the end of each section, and quickly skim the more practice-focussed Section 4.

For practitioners concerned with using technology successfully and taking their language teaching online, the pathway focusses on practical and reflective tasks, on different ways of teaching languages and how they can be successfully adapted to fit an online or blended teaching environment. If you are more interested in practical changes, you may want to skip the theoretical Section 2 at first, and maybe come back to it later. You can start with Section 3, which focusses on pedagogy, and make sure that you engage with all the tasks suggested for practical training.

For the very experienced language teacher with a firm grounding in theory and pedagogy, the refresher approach may be most suitable. This starts with recommendations and examples for online teaching and practising the art of online communication in Section 4. Occasionally, when needed, readers taking this pathway can return to theoretical or pedagogic aspects specific to online language teaching.

The Element can also be employed in language teacher training courses using a flipped pedagogy. The main text of the chapters can be set as preparatory

reading, the tasks as homework, and the results of the tasks shared in presentations and discussions in class time.

Finally, if you still need to be convinced that online language teaching works, and that it is here to stay, you could start reading the penultimate section with examples from recent research into online language teaching and learning, and how this research confirms success in a teaching environment that may become more of the norm for us all in the future.

### 1.2 The Style

To justify the different styles in this Element, it is necessary to introduce my own approach to teaching and research. I am a language teacher and teacher trainer, and as such I take a personal approach, trying to create a personal link to my students and to communicate with learners and colleagues in a personal style. In my view, this makes learning more relevant and more fun. As a distance language teacher, I use this style not only in face-to-face communication but also when writing course materials, books, web pages, tasks, and task instructions. Those parts of this Element, where I write as a teacher or trainer, are written in a teaching voice, directly addressing you, the reader.

On the other hand, I am also a researcher, trained in the continental style of written argumentation and the English academic style of clarity and sequencing. When I write about my own or other people's research, I tend to use an impersonal style; trying to present facts and findings succinctly and without recourse to rhetoric or persuasion. For researchers, it is our way of saving time and coming to the point without diversion, and it is more convincing to fellow researchers than a more entertaining or engaging way of writing.

### 1.3 The Structure

Each section provides a brief introductory overview, dips into theoretical aspects, and refers to research where appropriate. Apart from Section 2, all the chapters also provide examples of online teaching or suggestions for online tasks or strategies. References are provided to allow in-depth follow-up for some of the suggestions.

To deepen your understanding and allow you to experience the principles discussed immediately, every section will contain suggestions for tasks, such as reflections and additional practice. This will make it easier to employ the Element as a workbook or foundation text for a teacher training module; it will also allow independent working through the Element for experienced teachers aiming to upskill. Not all tasks will be suitable for all types of teachers, and sometimes there are alternative suggestions. Where the task, reflection, or additional practice does not suit or is not possible, it can be skipped without losing the thread of the

text. If you like the practice-oriented, active learning approach, you can repeat tasks and revisit the notes you have taken on your reflections at a later stage of reading.

## 1.4 Overview of Sections

This introductory section provides a description of online language learning and teaching, differentiates online from offline teaching, and sketches ways of blending the offline and online elements of language teaching. It also introduces a framework that helps to describe the given teaching situation (STAR).

Section 2 goes to the foundations of our understanding and supports the claim that language teachers need to reflect on their epistemological stance to make the best choices for their online language teaching. It also sketches some learning theories and links our understanding of how humans communicate to the implications of our views on reality and knowledge.

Section 3 focusses on pedagogies and ways to enhance your online teaching by choosing the approach that best fits the given situation. This is grounded in a brief historical overview of the development of language teaching approaches, specifically those concerned with technology-enhanced and online teaching.

Section 4 then points out various options for teachers to shift their practice along three dimensions: the visibility or centrality of technology, the authenticity of communication, and the dominance or the interventions of the teacher. This is illustrated with some examples.

Section 5 shows how we can find out more about how online language teaching works. It provides examples of research projects that prove or disprove our assumptions of online learning. This section also reconfirms how keeping abreast of current research can be beneficial for language teaching, especially in technology-enhanced teaching, an area that changes rapidly and often with unexpected outcomes.

Section 6 provides an outlook into the future of language teaching and prepares us for future challenges. This preparation comes in the form of practical tips for language teachers, and also looks at the future of the entire profession, reconsidering what qualities will make the teaching and learning of languages still desirable in the future, when we will live with technologies that can take over practical functions such as translation or interpreting.

## 1.5 Online, Technology-Enhanced, or Computer-Assisted?

Nowadays, the word ‘technology’ is often used to refer to digital tools and technologies in general. This shows how much information and communication technology (ICT) has become a mainstay of our lives. Before starting to talk about the practice or theory of online language teaching, it might therefore be worth

considering the delineations of the field covered here. My specialist research area is called CALL (computer-assisted language learning), which was originally defined by the use of a computer, most often in a classroom or computer room. This definition has long been superseded due to a change in technology and technology use. Tools have become less central, and for definitions of a research context, tools are no longer the main consideration. Employing ICT has also become an everyday practice for teachers. Definitions of the teaching context based on either technology or computer use have thus become almost meaningless. Instead, important criteria to describe language teaching practices include:

- **Space:** Is the teaching context purely face-to-face or fully online or is it blended (i.e., part of the teaching takes place in physical proximity and part at a distance)?
- **Time:** Is the communication asynchronous (e.g., email, blog) or synchronous (e.g., Skype, video-conferencing), or a mix of both?
- **Accreditation:** Is the educational setting formal, informal, non-formal, or does learning happen incidentally?
- **Role:** Is the teacher the focus of the classroom or is the learner in the lead?

As a teacher you may feel that you don't have much choice about these STAR (Space, Time, Accreditation, Role) factors. The space and time of your classes are decided by the educational institution, as are assessment and accreditation. There might even be an expectation about the 'proper' role of a teacher, often influenced by national or sector-specific standards. The STAR delineations can help to describe your teaching situation and to identify where it is possible to achieve change or where you are constrained by the given situation.

### 1.6 Conceptual Not Technical

Throughout this Element, I will continue to refer to CALL as research area. I will also use online learning and online teaching as pedagogical practices. I will try and avoid the term 'virtual' to characterise learning in online environments because the term implies that communication in virtual spaces may have less reality than communication taking place in physical presence. When I talk about online learning, I refer to a context where the majority of teaching and learning takes place online at a distance (i.e., students are not in a classroom where they use tools to go online while at the same time being in the physical presence of other learners and a teacher). Online teaching also implies the deliberate, planned, and pedagogically sound use of online learning environments and tasks. In contrast to this, I would call a face-to-face classroom where some tasks are completed with the occasional use of digital tools, such as tablets or smartphones, a technology-enhanced learning environment.

Blended learning is a deliberate, planned mix of online (distance) and face-to-face teaching and learning. When I use the term here, I am assuming that a considerable part of the teaching takes place online; and – again – that the move is planned and supported with appropriate pedagogy.

The shift from CALL to online learning is not just a question of terminology but a conceptual shift. Online communication takes away some of the aspects of face-to-face communication (just think about sensory impressions, such as smells or the joint realisation of space and distance) and it adds other aspects (e.g., the persistence of digital traces and the option of recordings). Throughout the Element, reasons why online language teaching is different from face-to-face teaching and from teaching other subjects online will be presented. These reasons go beyond the obvious (i.e., the use of technology to facilitate communication between learners and teachers). In short, the online medium changes the way the teacher can help their learners to make meaning of the language they are learning and – as I will argue – this requires a change in pedagogy.

### 1.7 Task

Reflecting on your needs and your previous experience, choose an appropriate pathway through the Element. To do this, you can either take a rational approach, writing down your goals and aims and matching those to section headings and the description given in the Introduction. Then select the pathway and note down where you will start reading or working through the Element.

You can also take a more imaginative approach to selecting your path by following the dream walk in the text that follows. Some people prefer this kind of mental exercise with closed eyes following a guiding voice, so there is a recorded version of this task available (Sound 1).

Doodle or imagine a path. In your mind start walking along this path, focus on the forward direction it takes you, but also allow impressions from the environment to enter your imagined walk. You can see plants or vistas to the side, hear rustling leaves or a motorway, smell flowers or a deli, and feel the movement of air and the ground under your feet. Keep walking. In the distance you see the



**Sound 1** Audio file available at [www.cambridge.org/stickler](http://www.cambridge.org/stickler).

end of the path. Allow yourself a pause and think about what you would like to find at the end of this path.

Can you match your desired goal with any of the following descriptions? Then you just follow the recommended path.

- a) If you want to find knowledge or understanding, follow the recommended pathway for the theoretical or foundational approach. Keep going and work systematically through the materials, taking notes and following up additional information with outside links.
- b) If you want to find confidence and security, focus on the practical pathway, and do as many tasks as you can fit in. Take regular account of your feelings and reflect on ideas and activities. Use others as a sounding board for your progress and be brave in trying out new ideas in the classroom or with friends.
- c) If you want to find excitement, adventure, or the unexpected, take an expansion pathway, and add to your already existing expertise by focussing on those aspects that are new to you. Try collaborating with colleagues as often as possible. Give the ideas a chance to develop but don't linger if you think you already know something. You can always come back.

If none of the descriptions fit what you want to find, take an exploratory path and just start by reading in a linear fashion until you decide what the best approach for you will be.

## 2 Knowledge, Language, and Learning

This section will provide an argument for practitioners to reflect on their epistemological stance. Our teaching is explicitly or implicitly based on theoretical assumptions, and to keep abreast of new developments without following every new fashion, it serves us well to understand the wider context and be selective in the professional development activities we undertake.

I will first talk about connections between knowledge and language, and why language teachers need epistemology for their teaching. I will then go on to very briefly present a small number of learning theories that fit the context of online learning, and finally touch upon the distinctive needs of language teachers, as opposed to teachers of other subjects, in understanding creativity and power relationships in online learning environments to avoid inadvertently 'silencing' our learners.

### 2.1 Why Language Teachers Need Epistemology

In our everyday lives we take many things for granted: what our senses tell us about the outside world; explanations for experiences we cannot immediately

feel, such as gravity; and the possibility of communicating with other humans and, to some degree, even animals. Moving between cultures can rattle some of this ‘natural’ understanding of the world. Different cultures take different aspects of reality for granted and question others. As language teachers we are familiar with these cultural differences, and part of our skills repertory is the ability to mediate between cultures and thus between divergent views of the world.

Comparing the way that different languages represent the world can help us to understand their underlying worldviews. To illustrate this, I will give a few examples relating to concepts, vocabulary, and grammar.

In Western (Indo-European) languages, we talk about the future lying before us, like a path we can set off on, like a horizon that can be reached. In contrast, Chinese expresses the future using prepositions indicating ‘behind’; the future, quite logically in this worldview, is in a space of the world that cannot be seen (it’s behind you) and the past stretches before us like a landscape that can be surveyed and catalogued, as its features are set, real, and visible. Other often-quoted examples are how the limits of our language limit what we can think (Wittgenstein, 1974), shape how we think (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) and even what we can see, depending on the fine-grained vocabulary some languages offer compared to others that are satisfied with just a few expressions. This goes to show that teaching a language cannot be reduced to teaching the translation of words from one form to the other; words transport slivers of different cultures and different worlds. And so does grammar. A language with gendered nouns divides the world into quite distinct categories from a non-gendered language. A three-gendered world ‘feels’ unlike one with a two-gender division. Also, the way that cases structure a sentence or allow the expression of relationships between concepts can influence how the speaker of this language structures their world.

Diving into a new language, and learning to move between different languages, can thus become a truly transformative experience of learning (Mezirow, 1981). A good language teacher will be able to explain these differences and make them part of this mind-shaping experience. They need to avoid teaching cultural hegemonies (i.e., calling one of these world views the correct or most advanced one, privileging one way of seeing, explaining, or talking about the world, or claiming reality or truth for one structure or description). For a language teacher it is therefore important to be aware of their underlying epistemological beliefs, even more so than for a teacher of other subjects. The following sub-section will look at epistemologies and their impact on learning theories before moving on to those theories of knowledge acquisition that are more suitable to an online environment.

## 2.2 The Creation of Knowledge

Philosophers have been investigating how we know that which we believe to know about the world for millennia; they also question how reliable that knowledge is. In attempts to make their claim to a certain truth more convincing, they establish rules for knowing, rules for validating truth. One of the results of this constant striving for reliable knowledge is the natural sciences, with their focus on numbers, measuring, and comparing natural phenomena. On the other hand, philosophers also take a keen interest in language, as one of the tools or mediators we use to communicate our understanding of the world to other humans. Language is needed to share our reality and yet language is not neutral. Philosophers have debated how language forms our thoughts (e.g., Whorf, 2012); how it limits what we can talk about (Wittgenstein, 1974); and how it is subject to power manipulation (Heath & Carroll, 1974) as well as being able to exert power over people (e.g., Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Without any claim to philosophical depth, here is a short overview of several epistemological stances or beliefs on how knowledge can be achieved. This will become useful when considering how we expect our students to learn a new language and to adjust to a new worldview.

Naïve realism, our everyday stance of taking things for granted outlined in the previous sub-section, is not strictly speaking a philosophical stance, but it serves as a starting point to discuss epistemological questions. It has entered philosophical debates as ‘common sense’. That is to say, if all of us were permanently concerned with deliberating how we achieve knowledge, we would not be able to survive. Therefore, simply taking some things for granted in our everyday lives without questioning their truth is good enough for most people most of the time.

Once we start questioning, however, we start looking for something that can provide certainty in an attempt to understand the world or to know the reality around us. Our senses act as our windows to the world and can be used to provide us with ‘empirical’ information (empiricism); our mind can be used to establish rules and checks that can help to ascertain whether our senses are misleading us (rationalism). However, these approaches to knowledge generation can be flawed. Our senses can adapt to the environment, and thus a person growing up with a tonal language, for example, will hear the distinction between intonation and tonal changes, whereas a speaker with a Western mother tongue might find it difficult to distinguish between them and might need more effort or help. Our mind is not an empty box with a measuring device telling truth from lie. It is constantly formed and re-formed in reaction to experience, learning, and teaching. Considering this adaptability allows us to look at students’



mistakes as part of a language-learning journey: it shows how they have formed a new rule and how their thinking develops. The rule may not be correct but it is an indication of taking in new information.

The epistemology of materialism takes the potential flaws of empiricism and rationalism into account and claims that knowledge is derived through a complex interweaving of material conditions (the physical world around us and the shaped environment), historical conditions, and human intervention, such as social and cultural influences. This interweaving is particularly powerful when we consider the digital tools that form part of our students' lives. They are physical entities, and at the same time they are cultural tools in a social environment. As teachers we can use them to influence our students' thinking if we understand how they function in context.

Phenomenology takes a different avenue to avoiding rationalist or empiricist simplicity by introducing the consideration that human beings have a specific condition of being in the world. Through this, we are able to realise that our impressions are not necessarily a truth while we experience and while we think, but that they are our take on the outside and inside worlds – they are phenomena and not facts. Phenomenology or hermeneutics are interpretivist approaches and differentiate between the intellectual endeavours seeking to explain the world (like natural sciences) and those seeking to interpret the world (like humanities, for example): understanding and interpreting use other ways of ascertaining truth than explaining; and methods suitable for the natural environment may not necessarily be effective in the humanities. This may seem far from the everyday classroom experience of language teachers. However, we experience the divergent needs of students asking for simple and clear-cut explanations (e.g., grammar rules) and those longing for an empathic assimilation of the lingua-culture (e.g., through art and literature). In a student-centred classroom we cater for both these innate human desires.

Another approach that has influenced our ideas about knowledge is psychoanalysis (Freud, 1900). By taking away the prerogative of the rational mind in human understanding and replacing it with the somewhat elusive concept of the *Unbewusste* (the subconscious mind), psychoanalysts claim that passion, desire, emotion, and drives interfere with our thoughts and actions. Where the conscious mind claimed by rationalist philosophers would allow us to clearly distinguish rational from irrational thoughts or emotions, the human mind as seen by psychoanalysts and their followers interlaces conscious and subconscious, rational and seemingly irrational. Psychoanalysis has influenced philosophical movements such as post-structuralism and provided arguments that place doubt on the existence of a truth altogether. This infusion of desire into language can be exploited by language teachers, not just in the service of

increasing motivation but also in the acknowledgement of the power of language to shape our dreams and aspirations.

Regardless of the terminology used and the finer points of argument that distinguish philosophical positions, it is important for language educators to realise how powerful our position is. Firstly, truth and knowledge are fiercely debated and highly desired labels, and secondly, language itself is being used to create, confirm, establish, and defend claims about truth and knowledge, and not always in a transparent fashion.<sup>1</sup> For these reasons language teachers are at the forefront of helping others to make meaning away from their established and ingrained thought processes and patterns. They support learners in moving between not only different languages and cultures but also between different worldviews and epistemologies. The following sub-sections depict, in a bit more detail, a number of contemporary theories that can be used to explain the learning of languages as one form of knowledge creation.

### 2.3 Creating and Questioning Certainty

This sub-section will outline why a questioning attitude is important for language teaching. Entering a new language/culture/worldview shakes some of our assumptions and beliefs, as described in Section 2.1. This experience can be frightening for some people. Language teachers are experienced mediators between two languages/cultures/worlds and can help to overcome the fear of their learners by encouraging the appreciation of the unfamiliar and the joy of the new.

Creating knowledge or finding the truth are ways that human beings safeguard against the uncertainties of life, the ambiguity of meaning, or the discomfort of misunderstandings. Historically, religion had the role of providing certainty and truth but in the Enlightenment era, rationalism and scientific investigation replaced it. Positivism, the epistemology of natural sciences, and rationalism developed as a response to superstition and the hegemony of religious models explaining the world (for more details, see Stickler & Hampel, 2019). According to positivists, the outside reality can be proven by repeated measuring and comparing, relying on collecting facts and figures. This insistence on objective truth, as opposed to received inspiration or a religious monopoly for truth, has meant that every enquiry critically questions the potential interference from emotions, beliefs, and superstition. While this was a fundamentally revolutionary approach in its origins, rationalism and

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<sup>1</sup> There are reasons why the words used by post-structuralists and radical feminist philosophers, for example, seem obscure in a framework of positivist epistemological hegemony. However, consider how obscure and even morally corrupt the language of modern physics would have seemed to a nun in the fifteenth century.