



Introduction

Carmen Argondizzo* and Gillian Mansfield

Empowering learners in their critical, creative and autonomous thinking: from a good language learner to a better world citizen

<https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2022-2051>

As we compile each new Issue and endeavour to identify a common thread running through the papers, there is usually at least one word that springs to mind, either because it is already the focus of a title or because it emerges as an underlying theme. This discovery helps us to create a coherent order to the Table of Contents. As we were deciding on the **Table of Contents in 12.1**, there were in fact several words that particularly came to mind as representations of current trends and key concepts in research into language education. To begin with, learners seem to be increasingly involved in **project-based activities**, which enhances **collaboration** among peers in tasks requiring and developing particular **language skills**, also with a view to ultimate **assessment**.

Due to the ensuing demands of the current world sanitary problems, teaching and learning is constantly having to adapt to **online courses and distance learning**. Questionnaires are used to check the intended success of activities, and to discover any likely **feelings of anxiety** that will impede **motivation** and thus **achievement** in language learning goals. These words and concepts are recurrent, but not exclusive, in the context of language education. Each reader of this Issue will surely wish to add their own. It is up to them, as teachers and researchers, to find their own niche in fostering positive learning outcomes whatever the learning situation and context, and hopefully share it as the present authors have wanted to do.

We have divided the *12.1 Issue* into three major sections. With **Section 1**, we want to engage the readers' attention in the attractiveness of *project-based language learning*. The first example is given through the description of an

*Corresponding author: Carmen Argondizzo, Università della Calabria, Rende, Italy,

E-mail: carmen.argondizzo@unical.it

Gillian Mansfield, Università di Parma, Parma, Italy, E-mail: gillianmansfield1125@gmail.com

intercontinental podcasting experience that learners of Italian carried out in an *Australian university*. While adopting a mixed-method study on their students' evaluation of the project, the authors show that the project and podcasting activity can be effective in helping students develop, reflect on and gain more confidence in their L2 skills. The experience also fosters the acquisition of non-linguistic skills, such as time management, problem solving, interpersonal abilities and autonomy (Riccardo Amorati, Elisabetta Ferrari, John Hajek). A second example focuses on an experience of collaborative writing of an online newspaper and animation of a radio show in two *Columbian universities* where the author favoured the communic'actionnelle approach in the context of the teaching/learning process of French as a foreign language. The study highlights how all the social actors involved in the process used their prior knowledge, individual culture, experiential language activities, and the capacities they possessed to reach the final tasks. The study also included the dynamic of integrated evaluation throughout the project. This played an important role since it showed the benefits of cross-evaluation carried out as a project continuum which became a relevant aspect of awareness, motivation, and self-reflection among learners (Fanny Baquero). A third example describes an intensive English course for students at a trilingual *Italian university* where the differences between a project-based learning (PBL) experience and the practice of teaching from a coursebook were explored. The results suggested that, while there was no difference in learner engagement and learning outcomes between the pilot group which engaged exclusively in PBL and the control group which was taught from a coursebook, the participants expressed particularly positive attitudes to PBL. At the same time the former group also expressed a desire for more teacher-led instruction. The authors suggest that such findings merit further investigation of PBL, including the longitudinal effects and the trialling of different combinations of PBL with explicit and deductive instruction (Michael Joseph Ennis, Kim Anne Barchi, Alfonso Merello and Andrew Wimhurst).

After these introductory reflections, which clearly highlight the role of learners as protagonists in the language classroom, Section 1 continues with two practical examples of student-centred language activities. In fact, the role of learners as protagonists emerges again from the description of a *student-centred English discussion* course carried out in a *Japanese university* where students, who initially showed strong resistance to the communicative tasks proposed, gradually experienced feelings of fulfillment and enjoyment that came about through pair and group work with their classmates. While the paper focuses on the Japanese context, it contributes to knowledge across Language Centres seeking to help students' transition to courses with a greater emphasis on spoken communication (Matthew Y. Schaefer, Samuel Reid and Anna Bordilovskaya). *Critical incidents* that reflect the learning strategies the students adopt, especially in spoken

discourse, the study styles they use, motivation for learning, as well as the actions they plan and conduct are then analysed in the next paper. The findings, collected in a *Czech university* over a time span of three years, form the basis of a deeper understanding of learners' attitudes and behaviors towards language. As a consequence, the study encourages reflection on the overall language teaching process, which in turn enhances language education methodology (Dagmar Siegllová).

Section 2 shifts the reader's attention to *assessment, self-assessment, and autonomous learning*. In the first paper, the proposal of a European harmonization of the modalities implemented *when assessing verbal interaction* is presented through an experiment of co-operation between *Spanish and French University Language Centres*. With the support of the national Language Centres Associations (ACLES and RANACLES), stakeholders agreed to collaborate extensively by sharing their certification systems, constructs and assessment routines, especially in relation to the Interaction skill. The authors' wish is to demonstrate that developing scientific collaboration can help to improve both single university certification systems as well as systems operating across European universities (Julia Zabala Delgado and Laurent Rouveyrol). When dealing, instead, with reading and writing skills, studies outlining the development of rating scales designed specifically for integrated assessments are rare. With the aim of expanding knowledge in the field, the following article reports on the development of a rating scale to assess performance on an integrated reading-into-writing task as part of an English-medium university entrance test in a *Turkish university*. The study has the aim to highlight that a rating scale based on careful analysis of target domain representations may be applied in the university entrance test given adequate rater training and standardisation. It therefore contributes to the growing body of research documenting the development and validation of rating scales for integrated skills assessment (Stefan O'Grady and Ozgur Taskesen). *Self-assessment of writing skills* is the topic covered in the next paper. Since this is a less widely investigated field of study, a research team from a *Hungarian university* investigated whether self-assessment of writing abilities might be beneficial for future language teachers in the Hungarian educational context. The team reports the benefits of the implementation of writing assessment and self-assessment which seem to be twofold at tertiary level. First, teacher trainees will be instructed on how to assess writing; second, they will be made aware of the benefits of self-assessment. Such training will therefore be more easily transferred to the university students they will meet in their future career, thus creating a spreading 'wave effect' of knowledge (Attila M. Wind and Anna Zólyomi). *Self-access learning of English intonation* with speech software is the focus of the following paper which, while introducing the reader to a *Chinese university* context, concentrates on the

popularity that language laboratories have in many Language Centres across the globe. While offering reflections on the role of computer-assisted language learning in the present era, the study investigates tertiary-level language learners' general and negative perception of speech analysis software, particularly related to the English language (Art Tsang). Perception is again the focus of the next article which describes a study conducted at a *Vietnamese university*. The study involved non-English-major students engaged in *autonomous learning language* activities, and investigated the perception they had of their responsibilities, ability to act autonomously, motivation to learn English, and autonomous activities within and outside class. The data were collected using questionnaires and follow-up interviews. The findings show that students should attempt to develop their own motivation in order to increase the frequency in which they carry out autonomous learning activities and in doing so create a good basis for their personal growth in becoming well-equipped autonomous learners (Son Van Nguyen and Anita Habók).

Section 3 offers papers focusing on *English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)*, *English Medium Instruction (EMI)*, *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)* programs and on *mediation skills* which are the first step towards accurate communication. *ELF* is considered through a small case study, carried out at an *Italian university*, which specifically addresses the importance of integrating academic degree programmes with courses in Intercultural Communication and *ELF*. The author suggests that University Language Centres may provide a crucial contribution to the development of an *ELF*-aware perspective by creating appropriate language activities specifically suitable for the growing number of multilingual classrooms (Anna Maria De Bartolo). The *EMI* context is observed through a study aimed to examine the contribution of general and specialist vocabulary knowledge to undergraduate students' academic success in university courses which are delivered in a *Saudi Arabian university*. The analysis of the results to the tests in which a group of students were involved showed that general and specialist vocabulary knowledge can predict students' academic achievement in *EMI* courses. The authors consider pedagogical implications and offer directions for future research (Ahmed Masrai, Dina Abdel Salam El-Dakhs and Hisham Al Khawar). The effects of *EMI* on official languages and students' preference of medium of instruction is also considered in a study carried out in an *Afghan university*. The study investigated students' views of reasons for the adoption of *EMI* and explored whether students' gender, first language and English proficiency had any significant impact on their responses. Globally speaking, the results showed that students had a positive attitude towards *EMI* in Higher Education, thus suggesting the need for the development of a policy leading towards gradual transition to bilingual education in Higher Education. Specifically, the authors believe that

universities should adopt EMI for various reasons, such as internationalization (Sayeed Naqibullah Orfan and Mohammad Yaqoob Seraj). The benefit of *CLIL* for second language development is addressed in the following article. The study considers the limitations of previous research and investigates the development of specific areas (i.e., Task Achievement, Coherence and Cohesion, Grammatical Range and Accuracy) of L2 English productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing) through CLIL courses conducted at a *university in Japan*. Despite the fact that, globally speaking, the findings provide evidence for the effectiveness of CLIL itself on L2 development in Higher Education, the study revealed that the degree of improvement was small, and that vocabulary and critical thinking skills did not improve significantly. The authors underline that, although CLIL has been gaining popularity as an L2 pedagogical approach, studies on its effectiveness are still scarce, especially in Higher Education contexts outside Europe. Thus, more investigation is required focusing on the linguistic competences achieved in CLIL courses in comparison to conventional L2 pedagogical approaches (Takanori Sato and Chantal Hemmi). *Mediation skills* are the focus of the next qualitative study that explores how native peers as teaching assistants can support language learning in Higher Education. The study, carried out at a *university in Finland*, presents data referring to five semi-structured group interviews of 15 teaching assistants. The interviews were analyzed thematically and clearly demonstrated the multiple roles that the assistants embraced during the programme and within the lessons. The role of peer students, who collaborate on an equal level with the learners, gains high value therefore since they could best facilitate the learning process and, more authentically, pave the way towards developing communication skills (Suvi Kotkavuori, Kaisa Hahl and Raili Hilden).

The 12.1 Issue ends with an **Activity Report** that connects back again to *project-based language learning*. The report presents an international university network created by a telecollaboration program which, through the initial coordination of a *university in Spain*, was carried out between eight universities and University Language Centres throughout *Europe*. By promoting language exchanges, the project aimed to satisfy one of the most immediate academic needs of university students, the development of their plurilingual and pluricultural profile. This report describes, firstly, the origin and development of the project, and secondly, based on the data collected from the questionnaires filled out by the participants, shows the most relevant results of the first edition of the project. The authors suggest, with regard to potential future research, the need to investigate whether the results of participants' self-evaluation and co-evaluation coincide with their real progress, and whether a connection between the number of meetings and the learning experience can be drawn from the project experience (Federico Silvagni, Esther Moruno López and Ema Hubáčková).

When designing the cohesion among interesting articles such as the ones included in this issue of *Language Learning for Higher Education*, as Editors-in-Chief, we always have a precise didactic aim in mind: highlighting, over and over again, the role of learners as protagonists in the language classroom. The articles that we selected, fully in tune with our pedagogical and linguistic beliefs, picture 16 different university contexts located in geographically and culturally diverse areas. Yet, they all lead us to key concepts such as learners' empowerment of their *critical, creative and autonomous thinking*. Indeed, we truly believe that by encouraging the development of good language learners we also, and especially, contribute to the development of better citizens in this wonderful, yet fragile, world. We reinforce our hope that this **12.1 Issue** will encourage readers to share their own linguistic research oriented thoughts and pedagogical reflections in future volumes.