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Zooming out of the crisis: Language and human collaboration

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The Challenge

Videoconferencing tools such as *Zoom* are being widely used as an immediate response to remote language teaching needs. However, these tools are rarely ideal as a replacement for the classroom's physically embodied engagement. What alternatives exist for educators facilitating students' language growth and human collaboration?

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Abstract

Language teachers are often masters of using the physical space in their language classrooms, re-arranging furniture, groups, and artifacts to facilitate meaningful encounters with and among learners. Indeed, during the COVID-19 crisis, many language teachers are sharing that these human encounters—reading learners' needs through body language, moving in and out of conversations, or engaging each other face-to-face—are the biggest felt loss in their emergent digital language classrooms. Yet, the new digital realities do not necessarily mean that teachers must sacrifice real collaboration among their learners. Digital tools were often designed to explicitly facilitate multimodal collaboration, and, with a wider variety of humans and human stories than may be found within the four walls of the typical classroom. This article aims to help language teachers facilitate more diverse interactions in the target language through the use of tools, spaces, and strategies that

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can be easily incorporated into our digital classrooms. We describe three categories of such activities (mobile-assisted learning, tandem learning, and service-learning) and explain how these can be most effectively incorporated into an online language class.

KEYWORDS
mobile-assisted language learning, tandem learning, service-learning, virtual communities

1 | INTRODUCTION

Shelter in place and create a *Zoom* (zoom.us) account! Use breakout rooms! Such is the default advice for language teachers during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet many find videoconferencing an awkward replacement for classrooms' physically embodied sociocognition, as Blum (2020) described recently:

> Over my decades of teaching, I've learned to read a room pretty well: the harmonized posture, the breaths, the laughter, the eye gaze. My classes are successful when everyone is so excited that they want to speak over each other out of sheer exuberance (...). Technological platforms such as Zoom provide some imitations of face-to-face interaction, what I notice the most is that I miss the three-dimensional faces and the bodies and the eyes and the breaths. ("Why We're Exhausted...")

Thinking of distance teaching in terms of *Zoom* focuses attention on what is missed or lacking. Yet technology also affords human connections which are broader than what is possible within a traditional classroom's four walls. This article proposes alternative tools, spaces, and strategies to facilitate more diverse interactions, language development, and language service in the digital world. Technology serves best when facilitating human connection, allowing learners to engage more intimately with the people, places, and stories in their own homes and, simultaneously, those distant in space, time, and culture. We argue that this crisis is an opportunity to more intentionally connect with other language users through digital means.

Each of the three authors picks up a different lens for examining how tech tools can enable empathetic human contact with others in this crisis, based on courses taught at their institution. Figure 1 illustrates these approaches to digitally mediated language-learning both intensifying learners' reflection on their immediate experiences (the me, here, now) and diversifying geographically, culturally, and identity-wise their target language community (the anyone, anywhere, anytime):

T. S. teaches mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and reviews MALL practices focused on building connections. G. G. teaches community-based courses, using a tandem learning framework, and shares tips for incorporating online intercultural exchanges into the curriculum. N. A. teaches critical service-learning courses and will discuss how critical service-learning in online environments can retain a focus on community, sensitivity, and justice.

FIGURE 1 Three lenses for magnifying technology's potential to both deepen and broaden learners' experience using the target language (loosely adapted from Pegrum [2014])

Magnifying human connection in technology
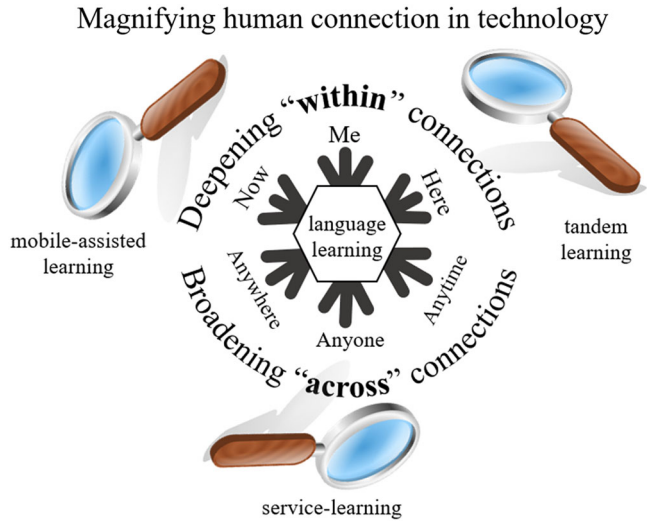
2 | MOBILIZING OUR LANGUAGE LEARNING

The switch to distance learning means that teachers cannot help but rely on technology. Yet relying more on smartphones (MALL) and less on computers can help reduce "*Zoom* fatigue." Furthermore, it can feel like a more natural use of screen time while alleviating competition with siblings/parents/roommates for the time at the shared desktop or laptop. Smartphones more seamlessly integrate technology-enhanced learning with the physical environment and offline relationships, like filming neighborhood tours, photographing vocabulary in real life, or recording interviews. Pegrum (2014) sorts activities into MALL for (a) tutorial, where the learners receive automated and instant feedback on closed-item assessments, (b) content, where learners use their smartphones to access authentic target-language materials, (c) creation, where learners produce language for an actual audience, with a true information gap, and (d) communication, where language users solve problems and bridge communication gaps together in real-time. As we will share in the next section, tandem learning apps such as *HelloTalk* (hellotalk.com) are most valuable for language acquisition, by integrating all four types of activity while emphasizing interpersonal interaction.

Yet left to their "own devices" most learners and teachers may be algorithmically steered towards lower-quality apps. Soberly assessing how most teachers and learners use smartphones for language learning, Burston (2014) laments that "pedagogically, MALL has been largely constrained to behaviorist, teacher-centered, tutorial applications," meaning apps like *Duolingo* for grammar (duolingo.com), *Quizlet* for vocabulary (quizlet.com), or *Elsa* for pronunciation (elsaspeak.com). Despite smartphones being communicative tools, applications for language learning have been "slow to exploit the communicative potential of available technology" (p. 344). Sawin and Guillén (2017) found that of the top language-learning apps returned in AppStore searches, the vast majority were tutorial MALL, mostly flashcard apps. Very few apps facilitated real exchange with other target-language users about topics both parties were invested in.

Tutorial apps *can* be helpful, and when gamified even fun, as extra "vitamins" for accuracy in language learning. However, better smartphone uses prioritize the human experience. Key questions for evaluating a use of MALL are whether it helps connect language learners (a) to

their own environments and (b) to a much more diverse set of people, stories, and environments. The following MALL activities especially emphasize human connection.

Content MALL (i.e., processing input) contextualizes previous learning, facilitates incidental acquisition, and creates curiosity about what the language learners hear, making them "hungrier" for explanations in their synchronous classes. Learners can follow social media accounts, which depict the lives of users in the target language. *Instagram* (instagram.com) or *Twitter* (twitter.com) accounts, which cover the COVID-19 crisis using humorous skits or memes while simultaneously using target grammar and vocabulary, are especially engaging, as are individual accounts that broadcast users' perspectives via Instagram stories. Teachers can themselves, or with learner help, curate accounts to follow which are level- and content-appropriate. Learners can bring their linguistic and cultural questions arising from the posts to group discussions. *Twitter* and *YouGlish* (youglish.com) are even searchable by word or phrase, allowing learners to find their own authentic examples of key structures. Several podcasts offer effective learner support, and allow learners to rest their eyes from the digital screen. *Lupa* (lupa.app) scaffolds grammatical and lexical practice via engaging stories from Spanish-language *RadioAmbulante* (radioambulante. org) for learners, while *News in Slow [Language]* (newsinslow.com) offers both current news stories and special serial stories for learners. Podcast listening can springboard further writing or discussion of both content and language.

For *Creation MALL* (i.e., producing output), learners can create a separate, target-language-only social media account. This is easiest on *Instagram*, which allows users to toggle between accounts. One author assigns posts where learners film and describe their environments using target structures, or create bilingual or subtitled *StoryCorps* (storycorps.org) interviews with their closest people. By adding specially created hashtags for a course, unit, or assignment, the collected posts are easily retrievable for assessment. *Instagram Stories* lets users create subtitles and creative visual effects; learners appreciate when real target users follow and comment on their creations. *Flipgrid* (flipgrid.com) is another mobile-friendly video platform for assignments featuring artifacts in the home, places in the neighborhood, or interviews with other people as language prompts.

WhatsApp (whatsapp.com) or any other simple group messaging app are extremely versatile for *Communication MALL* (i.e., interactive negotiation of meaning and form). Learners can communicate via text, recorded audios, or uploaded videos, additionally illustrated with images, gifs, and emojis. The main advantage is that teachers can easily assess learners' production. One author uses a whole-class *WhatsApp* group as the "glue" for arranging logistics as well as ongoingly running TL discussions of current events, our individual experiences, and personal environments. Small-group chats, in which the instructor is a member, are used for learners to negotiate form and meaning as they carry out task-based assignments. As the instructor, they then provide synchronous or asynchronous feedback within those chats via text, audio, or video. Student–student or teacher–student pairs facilitate conferencing for learners to feel individually seen/heard and are the most natural use of the app. From paired chats, learners can upload screenshots of their multimodal conversations for feedback on language and content, an especially fruitful practice for conversations with tandem partners.

3 | VIRTUAL EXCHANGES AS REAL COLLABORATION

It is only recently that our students can engage in virtual exchanges via MALL, thanks to apps such as *HelloTalk*, a Language Learning Social Network (LLSN) with more than 18 million language learners. *HelloTalk* connects users of different dominant languages to help each

other learn their respective target languages and affords them facilitative tools such as a dictionary, recorded audio messages, audio and video calls, and an in-house correcting sentence widget for providing explicit feedback. As Vollmer Rivera (2017) noted, *HelloTalk* is rooted in Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis and is especially suited for human collaboration. As post-COVID-19 instructors, we can design communicative and intercultural competence tasks for learners within *HelloTalk*, compensating for the lack of pedagogical tasks programmed into this app. These activities can be synchronous but also asynchronous, exploiting the recording tool to increase language-learning awareness, complexity, and automaticity (Guillén & Blake, 2017). Our students can also benefit from abundant and almost immediate feedback with *HelloTalk*, although learner training is recommended in order to ignore corrections which lack awareness of the Second Language Aquisition principles and are actually sociolinguistic variation issues, in my own experience.

Teachers, as language-learning facilitators, also have other options if they feel like it is too daunting to require students to find reliable partners, reflect, and share evidence of learning after using LLSNs. Companies such as *TalkAbroad* (talkabroad.com), *Conversifi* (conversifi.com), and *Language Amigo* (languageamigo.com) connect language learners with pedagogically-trained native speakers and allow instructors to access recordings of those video-synchronous interactions. No substantial literature exists on these resources, in comparison to teacher-run virtual exchanges (O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019), but company-run exchanges like *TalkAbroad* seem to improve oral proficiency and critical cultural awareness (Warner-Ault, 2020) and increase autonomy and affective gains (Sama & Wu, 2019). Contrary to teacher-run exchanges, company-run exchanges are not necessarily free but these are still low-cost solutions for students who are not able to engage in physical mobility, due to financial constraints and health crises such as COVID-19.

If the emergence of companies such as *Conversifi* is relatively new, the telecollaboration field (teacher-run exchanges) has a long history with more than 20 years of scientific literature (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016) and a newfound relevance. As Melinda Dooly reminded us recently in an interview with Bryan Smith (Dooly & Smith, 2020), doing telecollaboration implies partnering internationally dispersed students through language classes to support mutual learning, and it is most effective "when it forces learners and teachers out of their comfort zones and brings them to engage in linguistic, intercultural, and technological learning experiences which they would not usually be confronted with in their day-to-day learning" (Baroni et al, 2019, p. 107). A successful virtual exchange compelled our students to engage with different perspectives and challenge their assumptions about others and their own identity, beyond classroom walls and narrowed approaches to language growth. For this to happen, instructor mediation is frequently needed. Kurek and Müller-Hartmann (2019) mention several pedagogical interventions for virtual exchange facilitators such as:

- establishing a climate for a community of (sustained) inquiry,
- nurturing ongoing reflection, alleviating emotional load (give positive feedback, use humor, provide information on critical incidents, etc.),
- assuring common understanding of tasks, offering cognitive refinement based on literature or content knowledge, encouraging agency, or
- linking students' experiences with the future professional fields.

Virtual exchange participants can also benefit from preparation for potential differences in discursive patterns (Oskoz and Gimeno-Sanz, 2019) and a genre-based pedagogical approach

(Cunningham, 2019), so students develop awareness for the integration of content and language learning. All of these mediations are not only helpful for teacher-run telecollaboration but also student-run virtual exchanges which happen within LLSNs, as recommended above. They are also relevant for physically based exchanges like the ones organized at the Middlebury Institute, connecting Spanish and English learners in Monterey County through the *Team Tandem* (recicle.org) project.

Before moving to the online environment, *Team Tandem* thrived on weekly trips to neighboring communities, embodied cognition, and tangible affordances for deeper human connections (Guillén & Sawin, 2017), which made the transition to a virtual format particularly challenging. Using breakout rooms through *Zoom* did not work for some of our learners who lack access to computers or smartphones. However, a combination of *Zoom*, *WhatsApp*, and traditional phone calls enabled us to continue our relationship of mutual learning. As we did in previous iterations of Team Tandem, *WhatsApp* was also used as "partnership glue" for logistical and pedagogical purposes, allowing learners to bond and initiate reflections about language use in context, beyond the course and time constraints. An emerging need for the future of *Team Tandem* or any peer-to-peer educational project involves strengthening the connection with critical service-learning (see the section below) through institutional but also interpersonal partnerships (Avineri & Guillén, 2018). Transformative telecollaboration implies more than show and tell (Dooly & Smith, 2020), and we encourage language exchange learners, companies, and instructors to collaborate in the identification and alleviation of post-COVID-19 social issues such as the digital divide, which is the uneven distribution of access to technology.

4 | ALL SERVICE-LEARNING IS LANGUAGE LEARNING

During this time of rapid change, faculty, students, and community members engaged in critical service-learning partnerships have also needed to pivot to "virtual" forms of participation. What does this digital transition mean for what service can, and should, look like at this time and moving forward? And what roles do language, language learning, and communication have to play in making sense of this changing pedagogical landscape we find ourselves in? Critical service-learning is an approach to academic-community partnerships (Hall, Tandon, & Tremblay, 2015) in which faculty and students work with community members and community organizations with an eye towards social change—integrating reflection, course content, and service experiences along the way. Since March 2020, students in my service-learning courses have grappled with questions like "How is staying home a form of service?", "How can I serve an organization when I can't be physically with community members?", "How can I work "alongside" communities when our modes of communication have shifted?", and "What forms of civic action can I engage in when my "service hours" have abruptly ended?". We have all seen that this is an (unfortunately) opportune moment to examine issues of social inequity, service, and justice. For this endeavor, language is central.

We would argue that critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008) is an exceptional site for language learning (Perren & Wurr, 2015) since students engage in ongoing communication, negotiation, and collaboration with one another, their faculty members, community partner organizations, and community members. Moving across these different interactions involves "nested interculturality," "a collective of dispositions and practices for ethical engagement in intercultural interactions" (Avineri, 2019, p. 37). This type of language learning focuses on form(s) of engagement through real-world pragmatics, sociolinguistic competence, and

"audience coalescence" with a range of individuals and groups (Avineri & Perley, 2019). Language, communication, and language learning are central to these forms of engagement, as noted in the quotes from student reflections such as "One should really learn from Lydia (fellow classmate) nuances on constructive communication and readiness to write thoroughly thought emails in a glimpse of an eye" or "I think I am still learning how to shift my communication expectations and navigate relationship building. Next time I will pick up the phone sooner!"

These quotes demonstrate how service-learning is an opportunity to learn how to communicate, learn the language practices of a new culture/organization, and understand the perspectives of a community and various partner organizations through virtual and embodied communication. They also highlight how expectations around modes of communication are so critical to meaningful partnership-building.

Even in this online environment there are also specific ways that students can serve organizations while drawing upon and enhancing their language abilities, bridging both local and global communities. For example, one group of students in my *Service-Learning: International & Domestic Community Partnerships* course at the Middlebury Institute worked with Census 2020, using Japanese and Chinese to engage in outreach to local populations (see appendix for examples of translated Japanese materials). Another group of students engaged in survey design for community engagement, drawing on considerable language-related expertise in lexical choice, question design, and pragmatics. In my course at California State University, Monterey Bay, students are engaging in civic action focused on the rights of immigrants in detention facilities during COVID-19, through petitions and social media engagement. Another student group worked with a minority language (Hebrew) educators' collective to create pictures, videos, and teacher surveys to encourage lexical learning and community-building. Students engaged in small-scale critical discourse analysis of media sources or online linguistic landscapes about COVID-19. They can conceptualize language learning and language teaching as acts of service and reflect on how different languages provide differential access to resources in our world. They can reflect upon the ways that becoming multilingual is connected to social justice concerns (Avineri, Graham, Johnson, Riner, & Rosa, 2019) and is itself a civic duty. Through their language-learning process they contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic world. Students can also engage in participatory social media to raise awareness of language-related issues. They can use language to create stories about their and their family's experiences at this time, as a form of reflection for human connection (e.g., one student's story—"Alexa, please play 'I will survive.'").

Justice requires that everyone be willing to serve. This is our time to encourage accompaniment (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2016) with one another and communities in the increasingly online environment we find ourselves in. Mobile, tandem, and service-learning are three potential lenses for restoring this missing humanity to our digital classrooms.

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APPENDIX