Migrants' and refugees' digital literacies in life and language learning

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1. Introduction

The vast increase in migration, for political, economic and environmental reasons, has created unprecedented challenges on a global scale (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). Migrants face complex barriers in their host countries pertaining to aspects such as language acquisition, employment, and housing (United Nations, n.d.). Securing a stable position in society, developing digital literacy skills, and learning the language are crucial indicators of inclusion, and essential for navigating social and economic systems, accessing services, and building connections within their new communities (Artamonova & Androutsopoulos, 2019; Tammelin-Laine, Vaarala, Savolainen & Bogdanoff, 2020).

With ever-growing movements of populations and the associated need to ensure their capacity to be included and to contribute in various ways to the host societies, the question of migrants' and refugees' digital literacies has become an urgent one. The ability to make effective use of digital tools and resources can facilitate language learning and access to multiple services and systems of support, yet there is little published research on how migrating populations deploy and acquire digital literacy skills for these purposes. This special issue addresses this timely topic area, with the aim of compensating for the scarcity of relevant published research in the fields of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). It is a well-established fact many have access to mobile phones as an important digital tool for communication (Abou-Khalil, Helou, Flanagan, Pinkwart & Ogata, 2019; Bradley & Al-Sabbagh, 2022), which also caters for opportunities for mobile language learning (Demmans Epp, 2017; Kukulska-Hulme, 2019).

Since Diminescu's (2008) work on *connected migrants*, research has proliferated to explore the role of digital tools in migration experiences, particularly within the field of *digital migration studies* (Patterson & Leurs, 2019). It has been observed that smartphones, social media, and apps are commonly used by migrants as tools to access information and resources related to communication, daily life, and emotional management (Madianou & Miller, 2012). These tools are particularly significant for maintaining ties with loved ones in their countries of origin and expanding social networks in host countries (Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018). Karatsareas, Lytra and

Patiño-Santos (2024) report a growing body of research on language in the context of "onward migration" (involving extended stays in two or more destination countries, such as Colombians arriving in the UK after a stay in Spain), but digital literacy is still an emerging line of research in this domain (Netto *et al.*, 2022).

In this editorial, we set the scene by clarifying the meanings of key terms and highlight some considerations and challenges that are specific to research on language learning among migrant populations who are known to experience multiple forms of vulnerability and marginalization. We reflect on relationships between language competence and digital literacy, draw attention to issues of teacher education for migrant language learning, and point the way to future research directions in this emerging field. Finally, we briefly introduce the papers included in this special issue.

2. Migrants in research on digital literacies

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022), migration is "the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State, to a new residence" (p. 8). There are common political or economic reasons for migration, and individuals are received by countries with varying degrees of generosity and attention to their needs – and in some contexts they may be referred to as *immigrants*. The term *refugee* refers specifically to people who are forced to flee their countries due to extreme circumstances like war and encompasses "the experiences of people whose official status as 'refugee' has been established and are allowed to settle, as well as those who seek asylum elsewhere, or are in the process of applying for asylum" (Alencar, 2020: 10).

International students may also be included in research on experiences of migration and learning. The designation of *international student*, which replaced the term *foreign student* commonly used until the mid-2010s, conceals a number of heterogeneities and inequalities (Guichon, 2020; King & Raghuram, 2013). On the one hand, there are the most "desirable" students, coming from partner universities and benefiting from special services, dual-degree programmes, and inter-university agreements. On the other hand, there are those who come outside of such agreements, sometimes using academic mobility as a stepping stone toward long-term migration. Notably, university international relations offices often provide administrative and welcoming support at the beginning of the academic year for the former group, while students arriving outside these agreements, usually from the Global South, are left to fend for themselves. The mobility of the first group is structured, short term (usually one or two years), and a source of income for host universities. In contrast, the mobility of the second group is viewed more ambivalently by host institutions, as these students often have to work to finance their studies and generally possess lower economic and social capital.

As we can see, the term *migrant* covers a diversity of situations where language learning and digital tool use compete with other urgent priorities (Zelezny-Green, Vosloo & Conole, 2018), such as identity adjustments (e.g. positioning of an ethnic group relative to a country's dominant ethnicity or language), economic resources (e.g. the need to work to survive in the host country), access to digital resources (e.g. availability of personal devices and connectivity), psychological stability (e.g. the fragility caused by separation from loved ones or the trauma of forced migration), literacy levels (e.g. the length of pre-migration schooling), and administrative status (e.g. more or less legal status in the host country). There is, therefore, a dynamic interplay of destabilizing factors that influence the ease or difficulty of additional language acquisition, contingent upon migrants' status. This interplay underscores the growing complexity and challenges inherent in migrants' integration and language learning journeys.

Thus, more often than usual in CALL research, this special issue compels us to broaden the focus of research to include factors beyond gender, age, target language proficiency, and

motivation to use tools for learning. Working with migrant populations encourages researchers to adopt an intersectional lens to integrate parameters such as participants' economic status, religion, physical and psychological health, sexual orientation, skin colour, and, most importantly, their migration status (Trawalé, 2016).

Since all these parameters can combine to create multiple forms of marginalization (Patterson & Leurs, 2019), they must be taken into account when initiating research to study migrants' literacy and the role of digital tools in literacy. Additionally, when dealing with migrants who lack proficiency in the host country's language and may not have been schooled in their home countries, researchers are compelled to address low language proficiency levels – traditionally underexplored in CALL – and to closely examine learning conditions. These often occur far from university campuses and schools offering access to digital tools and connectivity and also far from the attention of most CALL researchers.

Finally, the vulnerability of migrants necessitates renewed attention to ethical considerations to protect their anonymity, especially for those in irregular situations. This also explains why most articles in this special issue are small in scale. As Guichon (2024) highlighted in his literature review on migrants' digital literacy, factors such as migrants' lack of time, distrust of authorities, and political or economic vulnerability may account for the limited number of participants in the reviewed studies and the high attrition rates. In other words, working on language learning with and for migrants forces a reconsideration of how CALL research is approached.

This special issue therefore addresses an area in great need of further research and dissemination: the intersection of migration, language learning, and information technology, encompassing digital literacy, social media, as well as uses of digital tools for language learning and cultural learning. Migrants must be able to use digital technologies in purposeful, safe, and also critical ways. By shedding light on these issues, we seek to deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by migrants and refugees, particularly in relation to language learning and digital empowerment.

3. Language competence and digital literacy

Language learning among migrants and refugees is deeply connected to their digital practices, especially in societies where reading and writing are increasingly mediated by technology (Alencar, 2020). Artamonova and Androutsopoulos (2019) emphasise that for this population, "a prerequisite to successful social integration is not just learning the [additional] language, but also being digitally literate and thereby able to manage everyday tasks with digital tools" (p. 83). For reasons of social, cultural, and linguistic inclusion, migrants frequently need to develop digital literacies in countries where most services are offered online and where learning is increasingly mediated by technology (Diminescu, 2020). However, language programmes offered to migrants are usually lacking in the development of digital skills (Malessa, 2018).

Language competence and digital literacy are in a symbiotic relationship: higher levels of digital literacy may give individuals better opportunities for language learning to improve their language competence, while higher levels of language competence may make it easier to acquire or improve their digital literacy. Reaching these higher levels may be an individual endeavour, it may happen informally in peer groups, or it may be supported by teachers in a more or less comprehensive way. Based on a study of Chinese high school students' digital literacy and autonomous learning, which included watching and listening to English language online resources in their spare time, Zeng (2023) argues that autonomous learning will help students with both their digital literacy and their English language proficiency; therefore, they should "make full use of the advantages of the Internet to set up interest groups, exchange ideas and experiences online, and share resources and information; they can use existing resources to set up personal simulation learning spaces, try independent learning" (p. 139). Addressing language teachers, Hanh (2024) describes digital

literacy as a crucial facet of language learning, and to encourage its integration in a foreign language teaching, offers recommendations pertaining to teacher professional development, curriculum design, access to technology, digital citizenship, assessment and feedback, and continuous improvement through processes such as experimentation, reflection, adaptation of teaching practices, collective learning, and staying informed about emerging trends. This indicates the extent to which language teachers may need to rethink and reconfigure their practices, if digital literacy is to be integrated more fully into language learning. In their book on digital literacies in the context of English as an additional language, Tour, Creely and Waterhouse (2022) argue that effective, democratic educational leadership is equally important to promote digital literacy among teachers, and that leaders need to be supported to adopt institution-wide approaches through improved teaching resources and cohesive professional development. Professional development should encompass how to facilitate acquisition of the skills of using a laptop or desktop computer, since migrants may have experience interacting with mobile devices but not with laptops or desktop computers. In addition, migrants' mobile skills primarily involve using social media (Alencar, 2018) rather than more comprehensive digital skills such as managing online applications or navigating and interpreting information from authorities online.

4. Teacher education within migrant language learning

The scarce research published on the topic of migrants' digital literacy and teacher education suggests that language teachers often lack confidence in their ability to meet learners' needs related to digital literacy (Tour, Creely & Waterhouse, 2021). This may stem from limited knowledge about migrants' use of digital tools outside the classroom, as well as from teachers' own limited familiarity with certain tools (Nassau & Molle, 2024). Furthermore, language teachers often lack the specialized training, appropriate resources, and institutional guidance needed to effectively integrate digital tools into their teaching to support the language development of adult migrants in an additional language (Malessa, 2021). To prevent exacerbating the digital divide and social inequalities, it is essential to ensure that all migrants have adequate access to training on and with digital tools, supported by teachers who are sufficiently prepared to harness the potential of digital technology, as is exemplified in several of the articles published in this special issue. Language teaching and teacher education should be adapted to reflect the increasing importance of technology in literacy development (Lacelle, Boutin & Lebrun, 2017), while CALL scholars need to more clearly define effective methods for researching and enhancing the integration of digital tools into literacy and language programs for migrants.

The increasingly widespread availability of conversational agents and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) to anyone who is able to access them on their device suggests new possibilities and risks for migrants developing their language competence and digital literacy, and poses new challenges in the relationships between teachers and their students. Students gain a new and willing partner for learning, feedback, conversations, and support, yet human teachers continue to play essential roles as instructors, facilitators, cultural advisors, collaborators, and advocates (Harrison & McIlwain, 2020; Harvey & Teemant, 2012), although there are potential pitfalls in relying too much on them (Leslie & Meng, 2024). They can also add further complexity to the burden of multiple adaptations that migrants endure. Therefore, it is clear that a great deal more research is needed to understand the role of GenAI in language teaching and learning among migrant populations, and the development of AI-related digital literacies among migrants and their teachers.

5. Growing but still insufficient research on migrants' digital literacy – looking ahead

Consequently, there is a need for scholars within CALL to advance and intensify research to understand the integration of digital tools in literacy and language programs for migrants as well as in informal learning situations, and to offer learning resources that are tailored to their needs.

Although studies have investigated the role of social media in facilitating communication (D'Agostino & Mocciaro, 2021) and the use of MALL applications to aid migrant inclusion (e.g. Abou-Khalil *et al.*, 2019; Bradley, Berbyuk Lindström & Sofkova Hashemi, 2017; Kukulska-Hulme, 2019), there is still limited research on the use of translation tools, speech-to-text technologies, and AI-powered applications by this population whose level of literacy and schooling can vary immensely (Adami, 2020). In his literature review, Guichon (2024) highlights a notable gap in research on migrants' and refugees' digital literacy in leading journals dedicated to second language learning and technology, such as *CALL*, *Language Learning & Technology*, *ReCALL*, and *System*. This lack of scholarly attention stands in sharp contrast to the substantial volume of publications in these same journals that focus on international students' digital literacy in language learning.

With respect to future directions, the papers in this special issue highlight the importance of facilitating more inclusive and engaging digital pedagogical practices in language learning for migrants, catering for the students' online learning experiences. This calls for creating inclusive learning environments that address the digital literacies needs of migrant students.

For informal learning practices, GenAI will play an increasingly important role as being a ubiquitous companion on users' mobile devices, which is pointing to the need for further exploration of its role in learning and settlement processes. For migrants, GenAI can be used as a mediator to more simplified ways of using digital devices, where instructing or prompting the AI, for instance, can be facilitated for these users. Another benefit of GenAI is the use of advanced voice chat modes for oral language production. This feature holds significant potential for migrants who are often active users of social media platforms, where communication through both text and voice chat plays a vital role. There are, however, pedagogical challenges in designing robots for conversational interaction in second language learning, as they need to be both engaging and able to motivate learners to interact in a realistic way (Engwall *et al.*, 2022). Future development for migrants should focus on designing and evaluating pedagogical practices, such as adaptive conversational systems, that cater to individual learner levels, provide corrective feedback, and support migrants in meaningful language acquisition.

Continued research should, thus, explore how adult migrants develop their digital practices by means of machine translation, smartphone applications, text-to-speech technologies, as well as the use of augmented and virtual reality. Investigating these digital practices is crucial for deepening our understanding of migrants' specific literacy needs and for shaping language and literacy curricula tailored to the contexts of host countries. In addition, as migrants frequently have a plurilingual repertoire, future research could investigate how they orchestrate this repertoire in conjunction with their digital skills. This would provide deeper insights into the translingual practices and negotiations of meaning that are afforded by digital tools (Mu, Han & Wen, 2025). Furthermore, such insights can significantly advance the growing field of digitally mediated language learning and teaching (Tour *et al.*, 2021). Collaborative, inclusive pedagogies harnessing these digital tools and further research studies on digital, cultural, and linguistic development are essential to empower migrant communities and deepen understanding of these synergies.

6. Introduction to the papers included in this special issue

There are eight articles in this special issue that raise topics related to the integration of digital technology into adult language learning as a transformative approach, particularly for migrants and refugees seeking to acquire new linguistic and culturally relevant skills. This research highlights the potential of digital tools to address challenges faced by these learners as well as challenges specifically for language teachers, including limited access to relevant digital tools and lack of previous connections to formal education. Although technology such as mobile language apps, online learning environments, and gamified tools have demonstrated an ability to provide

flexible, self-paced learning opportunities (Godwin-Jones, 2019), there are significant barriers for many adult migrants and refugees in leveraging digital technologies for language learning. The articles reveal issues related to digital literacy and the design of tools that often overlook the needs of these learners (Castaño-Muñoz, Colucci & Smidt, 2018). Furthermore, cultural and linguistic diversity among migrant populations poses challenges in creating inclusive and equitable digital learning experiences (Perez Peguero, 2024).

This call attracted international scholars originating from a wide range of countries, and the migrants in the eight articles came from numerous countries throughout the world. Moreover, the research was conducted in Australia, Belgium, China, Finland, Germany, Jordan, Türkiye, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. Most of the articles are small scale and exploratory, and they are mainly qualitative but with some quantitative elements in a mixed-methods mode. There is breadth in the methodologies and theoretical foundations in the articles, providing richness in angles and approaches of how to address this inherently multidisciplinary research area.

The articles are based on the notion that digitalization is spreading on a global scale and can be leveraged for migrant teaching and learning. The order of presentation of the eight papers is inevitably challenging. Given the diversity inherent in the research area, we have decided to arrange the papers based on their focus. All the papers concern language education, but their perspectives vary, since research participants may have included learners, teachers, programme coordinators, or education leaders. While some papers report on the engagement of multiple stakeholders (Jehoul *et al.*, Creely *et al.*, Satar *et al.*), others have a firm focus on learners (Liu, and Ye) or on teachers (Charitonos *et al.*, Febring & Risenfors, and Maahs *et al.*).

Annelies Jehoul, Helena Van Nuffel and **Mariet Schiepers** and explore the benefits and challenges of blended learning for Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA), addressing a contradiction in blended language learning. Despite the growth of blended learning and positive benefits offering increased learning opportunities and personalization, there are digital inequalities affecting vulnerable groups like migrants with limited education. Although integrating technology into adult education may present challenges, online learning paradoxically offers the potential to improve the basic skills for these groups. The studied context is Dutch L2 education in Belgium for LESLLA learners. Through a combination of a systematic literature review and a needs analysis of stakeholders, including LESLLA learners, the study explores the benefits and challenges of blended learning. The findings suggest that for this target group of low-literate L2 learners, there are a few aspects to consider, such as a thoughtful design of the blend, effective teacher conduct, and powerful policy of adult education centres.

Edwin Creely, Melissa Barnes, Ekaterina Tour, Michael Henderson, Peter Waterhouse, Melisa Agudelo Pena and **Sweta Vijaykumar Patel** address the topic of generative AI platforms with English as an additional language learners within an Australian context. For this target group, digital communication and services are embedded in all aspects of life and work, including advanced technologies like generative AI, which is vital for working and living in Australia. The data are from a nationwide study of adult education providers, with survey and focus group analysis to examine knowledge and attitudes of students, educators, and leaders on integrating generative AI into adult English as an additional language learning programme. The findings indicate that many adult learners are enthusiastic to learn about the potentials of generative AI, although there is a hesitance among educators to introduce such technology. This divergence indicates the need for professional development for educators and programme leaders, and to develop the AI literacy of learners. The authors conclude by advocating for a systemic approach that will include generative AI as part of learning programmes with students from adult migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Müge Satar, Paul Seedhouse, Ahmed Kharrufa, Sara Ganassin, Melinda Dooly, Johanna Buitrago Peña, Elifcan Öztekin, Sumru Akcan and **Belma Haznedar** explore digital skills development during migrants' process of learning a new language and adapting to a new life. The studied context is a web app developed in an EU-funded project with the aim of promoting social

cohesion. Migrants from Finland, Spain, Türkiye, and the UK participated in the project to engage with and co-create interactive digital cultural activities in multiple languages. Their digital, linguistic, and cultural gains were measured before and after workshops. Quantitative data consisted of reports of participants' digital skills, measured by a self-assessment tool, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews with the participants. The findings show statistically significant enhancement in migrants' self-reported digital skills, specifically digital content creation. However, comparing the migrants' digital skill development with that of home community members shows that migrants are not inherently deficient in their digital skills, which challenges stereotypes or assumptions that portray migrant populations as lacking in technological proficiency. The interview data suggested positive evaluations overall and highlighted the role of the web app instructions for content creation.

Guangxiang Leon Liu draws on a model of investment, examining how two Chinese English as a foreign language learners with rural migrant backgrounds negotiate their identities and draw on their social and cultural resources to invest in autonomous digital literacies for language learning, asserting their legitimacy in urban environments. The study employs an ethnographic design with data from interviews, reflexive journals, digital artefacts, and on-campus observations. Data were analysed through an inductive thematic approach and within- and cross-case data analysis. The findings indicate that the students experienced a profound sense of alienation and exclusion as they migrated from under-resourced rural spaces to the urban elite field, due to unequal power relations in urban classrooms. However, digital literacies empowered these migrant students to access diverse resources, reshape their identities as legitimate English speakers, and challenge exclusionary ideologies, offering insights for supporting rural migrant students in Chinese higher education.

Xiaoya Ye explores how trilingual Uyghur intranational migrant students made use of digital technologies to learn languages and negotiate their identities in Han-dominant environments during their internal migrations within China. The study adopts a poststructuralist perspective on identity by tracing four students from underdeveloped southern Xinjiang to northern Xinjiang for junior high school education, and to more developed cities for high school and higher education in eastern and southern China. Through a qualitative longitudinal case study with semi-structured interviews, class and campus observations, daily conversations, WeChat conversations, participants' reflections, and assignments, the findings reveal that the Uyghur minority students made use of digital technology to bridge the gap with Han students, negotiate their marginalised identities, integrate into the education system and extend their empowerment to other minority students. It is suggested that digital technology enabled the intranational migrant ethnic minority students to gain upward social mobility, supporting their language learning and identity development.

Koula Charitonos, Betul Khalil, Tara W. Ross, Cindy Bonfini-Hotlosz, Miki Aristorenas and **Ben Webster** examine how English language teachers in refugee settings negotiated and exercised autonomy in teaching and learning within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data are from a displacement context in Jordan using the Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER) method, with a group of six language teachers as peer researchers. The method involves participatory and qualitative research that captures the voices and lived experiences of members of the target community through peer interviews, in this case English language teachers in refugee settings. The findings point to the importance of understanding teacher autonomy in the context of language teaching in technology-poor environments. By offering insights into the dynamics of teacher autonomy in distinctive professional contexts, the paper enriches the broader discussion on digital language learning, highlighting the agency, roles, and skills that teachers need to support future crisis preparedness.

Linda Febring and **Signild Risenfors** investigate how teachers in a Swedish language introduction programme perceive digital resources as useful for teaching language and subject skills for newly arrived migrants. Although contemporary society is increasingly digital and digital

literacy is widely adopted by migrants, the use of information and communication technologies for teachers can be challenging. The study is qualitative, based on observations of 28 lessons within the language introduction programme for migrants and interviews with the observed teachers. The technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) model and thereafter discourse theory were used for analysing the material. The findings reveal that teachers restricted the students' use of digital resources, which was reflected in discourses on distrust and dichotomy. The discourse on distrust frames digital technology as a barrier to teaching, and the discourse on dichotomy highlights the opposition between digital and physical resources. In addition, teachers often talked about digital resources in relation to their own identities rather than how they used them in their teaching practices.

Ina-Maria Maahs, Andrea DeCapua and **Marco Triulzi** compare the results of two studies on teachers of adult multilingual migrant learners within the context of the German education system. The research is founded on the fact that increasing global digitalization is changing the everyday language skills required to participate in society and that linguistic as well as digital competences are required for migrants and digitalization offers new potential for learner-oriented language learning. The study, which is based on a synthesis of semi-structured interviews from two studies, highlights how teachers and migrant learners from diverse literacy levels and varying degrees of prior formal education utilise digital technologies to enhance language learning. The findings emphasise opportunities for effective, multilingual, and engaging language learning, while also addressing the challenges met by both learners and teachers, stressing the need for additional training in digital technology for both groups.

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