Citizens as users of languages and digital technology

e-lang team

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Before embarking on a project which aims to develop digital citizenship through language education, it is essential to define what is meant by "digital citizenship". The e-lang citizen project team therefore carried out a meta-analysis of 98 texts published by supranational organisations (such as the Council of Europe or UNESCO) and by specialists in the field. These publications contributed to further defining the notion of digital citizenship and its constitutive elements. The present profile of citizens as users of languages and digital technology is based on this analysis.

This profile should not be seen as a model or a target to be achieved but rather as the end result of a structured compilation of all the defining elements which emerged from the analysis of the reviewed literature. It should enable language practitioners to identify the aspects they can explore with their learners if they wish to promote digital citizenship education.

Rather than using the term "digital citizens", we have opted for the expression "citizens as users of languages and digital technology" since in our view it is not possible to make a strict distinction between digital and non-digital citizens: everyone combines digital and non-digital practices.

Profile

We regard "citizens as users of languages and digital technology" as individuals:

- who are social agents with a multi-faceted identity and who are involved in a wide range of online communities;
- whose actions are largely guided by the rights and responsibilities associated with certain values;
- who (inter)act with digital technology
    o within specific domains,
    o in particular ways,
    o based on individual characteristics,
    o and according to the context and/or the available infrastructures.

We will further explain these various aspects below.

Social agents with multi-faceted identities and who are involved in a wide range of online communities

It is a feature of digital citizenship that individuals may belong to various communities and adopt multifaceted identities. As users of languages and digital technology, citizens function in multiple time and space zones. They move between the physical and the digital spaces and are active both online and offline, navigating these spaces (more or less) seamlessly. Their involvement in the various communities evolves over time. As a result, they engage with a wide range of communities and have no obligation of loyalty toward *one* particular community.

It also means that they can develop a range of facets to their digital identity based on the various communities and their degree of involvement in them. Knowing how to combine and manage these online and offline activities and identities within these communities is thus paramount.

Rights and responsibilities associated with the community values

Rights and responsibilities are central to the notion of citizenship. In the case of citizens as digital users (in contrast with citizens of a country), a *single* reference society does not exist. They should therefore take into consideration, on the one hand, the rights and responsibilities defined by the various communities they participate in and, on the other hand, the values guiding these communities. This state of affairs can prove to be complex.

Some authors mention certain rights and responsibilities that can apply beyond communities: political, economic, and social rights, copyright and respect for intellectual property and licensing rights, the right to privacy and security (including data and personal security, linked to the issue of mental and physical well-being), the right to access digital tools, networks, media and information, the right to inclusion (linked to respect for diversity), to freedom of speech, publication and creation. The Council of Europe, along with other supranational and national agencies, attaches particular importance to human rights, democratic rights, and the rule of law. Notions linked with social justice, equity and equality also appear on occasions. The right to protest, to assemble and to demonstrate are also cited by certain authors.

Türk (2018) suggests to add a series of rights specifically connected to the digital environment: "the right to self-determination of information (being entitled to control how the data generated by one's online activities is stored and what becomes of it), the right to be forgotten, the right to data portability" (allowing the transfer and the use of personal data from one data-processing system to another), "the right to access, correction or deletion of personal data".

Social agents who (inter)act online within specific domains

Authors of texts which comprise the corpus identify many different actions undertaken by digital users: living, thinking, feeling but also communicating, learning, working, consuming (goods or content), creating, playing as well as establishing and maintaining social interactions.

These refer to the following five main domains of action outlined by researchers: social (with others or within communities), socio-economic, educational, cultural (or intercultural) and political (in the broadest sense of the term).

Citizens as digital users can be divided into four different categories based on their actions (see Cassels *et al.*, 2016):

- "consumers and viewers": this category includes activities such as surfing, researching, reading, listening, watching, browsing, and any other tasks linked with data processing (checking, evaluating…);
- mediators of information or content who, for example, share and distribute but also evaluate or comment;
- creators who produce new content, practices, tools, as well as new ways to interact (on forums, blogs or wikis, etc.) and to engage in the digital society;
- changemakers who participate in the construction of a societal project, promoting, for example, inclusion, health, well-being, environmental protection, or the fight against inequalities. These citizens contribute to the evolution and transformation of the context, but also of communities, and therefore of the rights, responsibilities and values that they represent.

It is worth noting that these categories are not stages or levels to be attained in a linear fashion. The level and manner of engagement and participation may vary depending on interests, context, knowledge of codes and standards, languages spoken, sense (or lack) of security in speaking out, etc. An individual may, for example, carry out a transformative action in the "Black lives matter" movement but be a consumer of information concerning environmental issues.

Social agents who act in specific ways

The texts analysed within the corpus also characterise the actions of citizens who use digital technology. Depending on the authors, the actions of these citizens are described as:

- habitual, regular;
- competent and efficient;
- informed and aware;
- ethical and responsible (free, meaningful, accountable, courteous, respectful, tolerant, inclusive, respecting etiquette, lawful);
- safe (confident, healthy);
- consistent (in line with own beliefs, values, etc.).

Principles guiding the actions of the citizens as digital users

Personal attributes

In order to be such citizens and to act in ways we have just described, the language and digital users need to possess:

- knowledge;
- competences (including cognitive and socio-emotional), skills and know-how (especially technical);
- an awareness (linked to the various components of digital citizenship: for example, awareness of what constitutes a(n) (un)safe or (un)ethical action);
- a (critical) understanding of information, practices, digital technology, etc.;
- attitudes or behavioural skills associated with the ability to engage.

In order to act in an ethical and responsible way, it is therefore important, for example, to be aware of what constitutes an ethical and responsible action, to know and to critically understand one's rights and responsibilities. It is also necessary to possess the relevant skills (e.g. technological) and competences to exercise these rights and responsibilities as well as being prepared to personally engage and participate.

In addition, many authors stress the importance of being open to lifelong learning in order to cope with the constant evolution of societies, technologies, and practices.

Context / Infrastructures

A conducive context and suitable infrastructures are crucial to being citizens as digital users. These include:

- fair, equal and good quality access to technology, networks and online content;
- a reliable technical infrastructure;
- a legal framework that promotes agency and participation;
- trusted sources of information;
- and an essential feature: access to digital citizenship education.

Links with language education

Digital citizenship education and language education are interconnected insofar as they both aim to contribute to the development of social agents. Both domains take the view that social agents act within multifaceted communities ranging from speech communities (communities consisting of those directly involved in communication) to global social groups. Within the socio-interactional approach associated with both language and digital citizenship education (see Ollivier & projet e-lang, 2018 ; Caws, Hamel, Jeanneau & Ollivier, 2021), these communities play an essential part. It follows that human action is largely defined and shaped by interactions with and within these communities.

In addition to these fundamental communalities, other important links exist.

- One of the key factors allowing technology users to act as citizens, as defined above, is the ability to communicate (which is also at the heart of language pedagogy). This ability requires attitudes, awareness, knowledge and skills promoted by (digital) citizenship education. These include, for example, the ability to understand and evaluate information and to use technologies in an efficient, critical and responsible manner.
- In addition, in a digital environment where languages co-exist and sometimes even intermingle, a plurilingual competence – one of the main objectives of language teaching – is becoming increasingly important.
- Mediation, the importance of which is highlighted in language education and is given detailed discussion in the CEFR Companion Volume, is a key notion in digital citizenship education due to the numerous sharing and mediation practices which take place on social networks.
- The concept of the diversity of human beings, societies and communities forms the basis of the intercultural approach in language education. It is also an important component of the education of citizens as language and digital technology users.
- Digital citizenship researchers identify several other rights which are also fundamental to language learning: the right to inclusion and respect for diversity, especially cultural and linguistic diversity.

It follows from this that, in our view, language teaching and learning should move more strongly in the direction of an education in languages that would promote the development of attitudes (especially critical ones), skills, awareness and knowledge required to exercise (digital) citizenship. These would enable users to (inter)act online and offline within local and global communities and in interpersonal relationships in a safe, informed, critical, ethical and responsible or even transformative way. It includes, for example, the development of an awareness of the individual and/or shared values, as well as the codes and conventions shaping specific contexts of (inter)action. This would allow for mutual understanding and openness to diversity and otherness, and could even lead to the transformation of individuals, communities and societies.

These objectives can be achieved by using activities involving reflection and debate on digital citizenship as well as experiencing digital citizenship first-hand while undertaking real-world tasks. On the basis of this profile of citizens as users of languages and digital technology, the e-lang citizen project therefore offers:

- a pedagogical framework establishing the guiding principles for digital citizenship education through language teaching and learning;

- a database of tasks and activities which may support the development of citizens as a language and digital technology users.