

Transferring Language Learning and Teaching From Face-to-Face to Online Settings

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Chapter 10

Digital Literacy in Language Education: The COVID–19 Era of Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

The abrupt shift to online learning and teaching shocked the majority of the language education community who had to become familiar with online tools, resources, and adjust their teaching approaches overnight. Beyond the state of alarm, it is now evident that a nexus between innovation and ICT exists. The pandemic has highlighted the critical role of technology in language education. As part of a larger study, this chapter focuses on language education in Cyprus and examines the issues facing language teachers' digital literacy and competence through the lens of complex and unpredictable adaptive systems. The data displayed and discussed in the chapter contradicts teachers' confidence of their digital literacy and competence of delivering language lessons online and what was applied in practice, and concludes by making specific recommendations at policy making, pedagogical, and research levels.

INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. Cyprus responded with an instant national lockdown in order to prevent the spread. In schools there were closures and teachers were recalled to recreate school-specific action plans for distance synchronous

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and asynchronous learning options within 5-7 days (<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu>). The abrupt shift to online learning and teaching shocked the majority of the language education community who had to become familiar with online tools, resources, and adjust their teaching approaches overnight (Giannikas, 2020). Beyond the state of alarm, it is now evident that a nexus between innovation and ICT exists. The pandemic has highlighted the critical role of technology in language education. However, the successful integration of technologies and digital tools mainly depends on the teacher's knowledge and literacy to apply them effectively and meaningfully within the learning environment. In other words, teachers are those who are obliged to decide which tools, as a means of instruction, would assist them in language teaching and how to use the chosen technology in delivering the content. This is a timely process, one that cannot be developed overnight. One's competence is associated with the skills teachers have developed during their training and practice, which evidently prompts them to apply certain tools. Most importantly, digital literacy implies that language teachers have developed the ability and the know-how to reach teaching objectives in their contexts (Guzmán & Marín, 2011) and guide students effectively within the digital environment. Therefore, we cannot merely speak of the abilities to assess and retrieve information, but should additionally develop skills to sufficiently use this information, transform it into knowledge, and share it with students (Sánchez-Cruzado, Santiago Campión & Sánchez-Compañá, 2021). As will be discussed further in this chapter, the switch to online learning environments and the concept of digital literacy is perplexing; however, it has been seen as the only solution at the start of the pandemic in a number of contexts. Nonetheless, the educational system at large has shown limitations regarding school policies, and the state of practitioners' digital competence this past year of living with the pandemic. The pressure of the lack of training and preparation has resurfaced, as the majority of the educational community reached the conclusion that technology and digital tools can help solve numerous problems of the teaching-learning process such as lack of interest and motivation, encouraging cooperative work, social awareness, autonomy, and helping students become digitally literate for educational purposes (Sánchez-Cruzado et al, 2021; Altuna Urdín & Martínez de Morentin de Goñi y Amenabar Perurena, 2017). Unfortunately, well into the 21st century, technology is still not properly established in the day-to-day teaching approaches, and this was verified by all the teachers' and students' struggles during the lockdown. As part of a larger study, this book chapter focuses on language education in Cyprus and examines the issues facing language teachers' digital literacy and competence through the lens of complex and unpredictable adaptive systems. More specifically, the authors have focused on the following research questions:

Q1: What are the digital literacy levels of English language teachers?

Q2: What perceptions do English teachers have about digital literacy?

Q3: Do teachers' digital literacy perceptions agree to what was applied in practice?

The data displayed and discussed in the chapter contradicts teachers' confidence of their digital literacy and competence of delivering language lessons online and what was applied in practice, and concludes by making specific recommendations at policy making, pedagogical and research level.

BACKGROUND

Before the pandemic, the education system in Cyprus was based on onsite learning and the substantial integration of technology, in public schools especially, was close to absent (Hall, et al. 2020). Before the pandemic, there was no sign of a framework for remote learning, as far as public schools were concerned (Giannikas, 2021). Therefore, it is safe to assume that the Cypriot education system was caught off-guard, as it was not prepared to deploy a full distance education plan. Nonetheless, the Minister of Education of the Republic of Cyprus, Prodromos Prodromou, had claimed in the Spring of 2020 that the vast majority of teachers in Cyprus are ready to implement distance learning. Specifically, the Minister argued that “we need to face our reservations and our hesitations regarding this new system, together” (<https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/10/29/distance-learning-the-way-to-go-says-education-minister/>). The Ministry announced school and university closures as a precautionary measure to contain the spread of COVID-19, and more than 110,000 teachers and students joined and had access to the Distance Education System developed, especially, by the Ministry. To facilitate the transition to online teaching, the Ministry has claimed to have implemented key actions which include (MOEC, 2020):

- Internet connection to all households for children to participate in distance learning;
- 2,000 tablets have been provided to schools for use in the distance learning program;
- The Ministry of Education launched a new website (), as one useful guide for distance learning;
- Free use of MS TEAMS (Office365) for all students and teachers;
- Asynchronous training for all teachers on how to use the virtual classrooms.

Supportive educational material was uploaded onto the Ministry’s website. Public and private television channels also supported overall efforts by broadcasting lessons and other educational programmes, especially for younger age groups. The gradual lifting of the COVID-19 restrictions began on 4 May, 2020, where, according to the government plan for reopening schools, priority was given to the final year of upper secondary education. Students were divided into two groups and physically attended school lessons on a weekly rotation basis. Primary and lower secondary education schools did not fall far behind as they reopened on 21 May 2020, on the same weekly rotation basis. Students who were in the first and second year of upper secondary education did not return to school that year and continued their distance learning (<https://www.cadefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/cyprus-responses-covid-19-outbreak>).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main aim of the chapter is to draw attention to the practitioner’s practices and needs in order to propose an appropriate training path that will effectively meet the challenges of developing digital literacy.

Data Collection Tools

The participants of the study completed an online survey, which was selected as a method of collecting language professionals’ views. The aim of creating the tool in question was to produce data that are valid, robust, and meaningful, therefore, prior to dissemination the survey was piloted and feedback was used in order to develop the content and verify the quality, validity and the usability of the survey. The

pilot prompted participants to: 1) determine whether the questions appear reasonable for acquiring the necessary data; 2) ensure the questions are all focussed on the issue; 3) assess whether the questions posed imply the desired outcome to be achieved by the specific data collection tool; 4) address whether the questions posed reflect the response of the entire target population (also see Ball, 2019).

After the survey was edited as per the feedback received it disseminated to the target audience in English, and was created on Google Forms with built-in features to facilitate data collection and analysis (see: <https://forms.gle/kx2a5AK7hiXnBVeY6>). The survey contained 47 questions which consisted of:

- Yes/no or other dichotomous questions
- Open-ended text responses (long answer and short answer)
- Multiple choice – select exactly 1 of n (select a single answer).
- Multiple choice – select as many as k of n (select variable number of answers)
- Likert and semantic differential questions
- Open-ended questions
- Horizontal-scale, vertical-scale, drop-down, side-by-side formats.

The survey addressed the following: 1) Demographic Information, 2) Digital Confidence 3) Online Teaching Methods and Practices/Assessment, 4) Resources 5) Transfer from Onsite to Online, and 6) Teacher Education Needs. The survey was estimated to take approximately 30 minutes to complete, and reached a wide audience via email requests. The email sent to individual respondents contained information regarding the purpose of the study and the link to the online survey. Participants were sent a follow-up reminder email with the survey link within a 3-week period.

All participants remained anonymous and it was made clear that the entering of information to the survey questions and submission of their response signified consent for their data to be used by the researchers and authors of this chapter. The descriptive analysis conducted on Google forms facilitated the process of data analysis. Initially Microsoft Excel was used for straightforward functionality. The researchers also adopted a coding process for the open-ended responses, which involved the manual allocation of categories to practitioners' comments. Further statistical analysis used multiple spearman correlations between variables of interest.

The Participants

As part of a larger study, there was a sample of 45 participants based in the Republic of Cyprus, with the vast majority of the participants being female (86%). The data showed that the majority of the participants were secondary school English teachers (27%), followed by Higher/further education and private institution instructors (25% each sector), and 11% were primary school English teachers, as can be seen in detail in Table 1:

Digital Literacy in Language Education

Table 1. Participants' place of work

Place of Work	N	%
Primary School	5	11%
Secondary School	12	27%
Higher/Further Education	11	25%
Language School/Institution	11	25%
Freelance teacher	3	7%
Freelance teacher trainer	1	2%
Other	1	2%

Almost half of the participants had been teaching for 11-20 years (48%) and 80% were postgraduate degree holders. Furthermore, according to the data a high percentage of 69% claim to have received training to teach online, nonetheless the vast majority claim to have no previous experience of online teaching, whereas only 27% claimed to *sometimes* teach online. Just over half of the participants (57%) claim to have *never* taught blended courses, 27% stated that they sometimes teach blended courses, while 16% teach blended courses *very often*. The training the participants have received to participate in any online or blended courses can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2. Online language teacher training

Type of training	N	%
Self-training (i.e. attending webinars, watching videos, reading online activities etc.)	23	72%
Training provided by my institution	10	31%
Training provided by specialized training institutions	10	31%
Informal training by colleagues	11	34%

The data further showed that 87% of the respondents transferred all their teaching online, and 86% stated that it was mandatory that they do so. More specifically, there was a negative correlation between teachers reporting that it was mandatory in their school/institution to transition the face-to-face courses/classes to an online platform and them working at a primary school, $\rho(44) = -.484, p = .010$. There was a positive correlation between teachers reporting that it was mandatory in their school/institution to transition the face-to-face courses/classes to an online platform and them reporting that they have received training on how to teach online, $\rho(42) = .610, p < .0005$. All participants were given a week to make this change, and no variables correlated with the number of days the teachers were given to prepare their courses/classes to go online.

FINDINGS

Digital Confidence

This section of the chapter presents the findings of the study with a focus on the data gathered from the case of the Republic of Cyprus.

According to the statistical data analysis, 60% of the respondents were confident in their ability to implement the existing curriculum in an online environment, however there was a negative correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to implement the existing curriculum in an online environment and them working at a primary school, $\rho(44) = -.457, p = .021$. However, there was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to implement existing curriculum in an online environment and them reporting that they have received training on how to teach online, $\rho(42) = .459, p = .025$. Additionally, 57% of the respondents stated they were confident in applying various online teaching approaches, 52% were confident using digital tools in their online teaching environment, and 47% stated they were confident in helping their students develop their digital knowledge. Furthermore, there was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to use different methods of teaching online and them reporting that they have taught blended courses before, $\rho(44) = .526, p = .003$. There was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to use different methods of teaching online and them reporting that they have received training on how to teach online, $\rho(42) = .480, p = .015$. These facts are also displayed in Tables 3 and 4:

Table 3. Teachers' confidence in their ability to implement the curriculum online

Confidence in my ability to implement existing curriculum in an online	N	%
To a lesser extent confident	3	7%
2	8	18%
3	7	16%
4	13	30%
Very confident	13	30%

Table 4. Teachers' confidence in their online teaching methods

Confidence in my ability to use different methods of teaching online	N	%
To a lesser extent confident	4	9%
2	5	11%
3	10	23%
4	17	39%
Very confident	8	18%

Digital Literacy in Language Education

According to the data regarding the use of digital tools, only 27% stated that they were very confident in the use of digital tools. There was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to use different digital tools for teaching purposes and them reporting that they have taught blended courses before, $\rho(44) = .565, p = .001$. Furthermore, only 27% of the respondents claimed that they were confident in their ability to assist students with digital tools, while putting their digital knowledge to use. There was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to help students develop new digital knowledge and skills and them reporting that they have taught online before COVID-19, $\rho(44) = .449, p = .025$. There was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to help students develop new digital knowledge and skills and them reporting that they have taught blended courses before, $\rho(44) = .515, p = .004$.

Online Teaching Methods and Practices

The following survey questions prompted respondents to elaborate regarding their online teaching practices. One of the most serious issues that arose within the education community during the lockdown caused by the pandemic was the students' interactive and social learning activity. According to the data, 77% were to a lesser extent confident in this domain. There was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to promote online cooperation among students and them reporting that they have taught blended courses before, $\rho(44) = .477, p = .012$. A high percentage of 73% to a lesser extent confident in managing online collaboration among students. According to the statistical results, there was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to manage online cooperation among students and them reporting that they have taught blended courses before, $\rho(44) = .463, p = .018$.

The respondents were also asked about the material they used during their online teaching. Regarding the use of textbooks, 65% were to a lesser extent confident about their ability to apply digital tools in order to enhance textbook-based content, and no variables correlated with teachers' responses. The teachers' confidence plummeted when it came to using online student assessment to modify instruction, as only 7% felt confident to do so. According to the statistical analysis, there was a negative correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to use online student assessment to modify instruction and them working at a primary school, $\rho(44) = -.528, p = .003$. There was a positive correlation between teachers feeling confident in their ability to use online student assessment to modify instruction and them reporting that they have taught blended courses before, $\rho(44) = .452, p = .023$.

The survey prompted responses on relevant activities teachers encouraged their students to take part in online, as displayed in Table 5:

Table 5. Online activities teachers encourage

Encouraging students to engage in:	N	%
Pair work	15	35%
Group work	18	42%
Independent study	37	86%
Self-assessment	28	65%
Peer assessment	8	19%
Teacher assessment	0	0%

According to the statistical analysis, no variables correlated with teachers encouraging their students to engage in pair work, in independent study, in self-assessment, in peer-assessment and teacher assessment. There was a positive correlation between teachers encouraging their students to engage in group work and them reporting that they have taught blended courses before, $\rho(43) = .510, p = .005$. Additionally, 73% of the respondents have observed changes in their teaching since transferring online. However, the majority of respondents (69%) also indicated that their online teaching reflects their classroom teaching.

Resources

The data showed that the respondents used a variety of resources, with 86% applying their own ideas in the online learning environment, 73% used online resources, 39% collaborated with colleagues to get hold of resources, 34% were provided with guidelines from their institution and a low 23% sought advice from a colleague with online teaching experience. There was a positive correlation between teachers reporting that they have used their own ideas when making the transition to online teaching and them reporting that they have received self-training, $\rho(32) = .604, p = .003$. No variables correlated 1) with teachers reporting that they have used resources they found online when making the transition to online teaching, 2) with teachers reporting that they have sought advice from someone with more online teaching experience, and 3) with teachers reporting that they have been working closely with some of their colleagues when making the transition to online teaching. The data also indicate that 73% of the teachers used online resources prior to COVID-19. Furthermore, 64% of the teachers have stated that they plan to continue to use the *new* material when they return to the classroom.

Transfer from Onsite to Online

According to the data gathered, 57% of the teachers have indicated a positive experience to the transfer from onsite to online teaching. Nonetheless, 75% of the respondents claim that the educational leadership in their context was not ready for the education emergency. Furthermore, 79% of the respondents indicated that the educational leadership did not provide teachers with guidance and support for online teaching. The data also shows that 73% of the respondents were not provided with the necessary equipment to carry out online teaching. Table 6 displays the vision the institutions held regarding online learning, which could help readers comprehend the background of online learning among important stakeholders within the Republic of Cyprus. To be specific, and according to the highest percentages, 51% claim to have received very little support when shifting their teaching to an online environment; 30% claimed that the available infrastructure was taken into account; while 28% stated that specific objectives of the implementation of online learning had been set. According to the statistical analysis, there was a positive correlation between teachers reporting that very little has been done to support them in shifting to online teaching in their institution and them working in the public sector, $\rho(43) = .447, p = .030$.

Digital Literacy in Language Education

Table 6. Institutions' vision of online learning

Specifically, in our institution:	N	%
A strong vision towards online learning is present	10	23%
Professional development for online learning is supported	11	26%
Specific objectives of the implementation of the online learning have been set	12	28%
The available ICT infrastructure is taken into account	13	30%
Attention is paid to the processes of changing to online learning	10	23%
A professional development strategy towards online learning has been adopted	6	14%
Very little has been done to support us in shifting to online teaching	22	51%
Other	0	0%

Furthermore, the respondents shed light on the other side of the screen, specifically the equipment the students were provided with in order to embark upon their ERT journey. The data show that the majority of the respondents taught students who did not have the necessary equipment (i.e. laptop, quality internet connection, etc.). Furthermore, 48% of the respondents claim that their students were not willing to attend their online classes. Teachers were divided, as 41% stated in the surveys that their students received guidelines on how to access the online platforms, a percentage very close to that of those who referred to their students' unwillingness to join the online classes. Teachers also demolish the myth of the tech savvy student as 61% stated that their learners were not familiar with digital tools for educational purposes. According to the statistical analysis, there was a negative correlation between teachers agreeing that their students are familiar with online tools for educational purposes and them working in the public sector, $\rho(44) = -.579, p < .0005$. Additionally, just over half the respondents (52%) stated that their students were cooperative during their online classes, and 63% stated that there were positive outcomes through online education; these are high numbers to result from an emergency situation.

Teacher Education

Regarding teachers' professional development and training prior to COVID-19, 52% stated that they attended online teacher training webinars, 59% attended professional development in educational technologies held by various teaching communities. According to the statistical analysis, there was a negative correlation between teachers reporting that before COVID-19, they used to participate in teacher communities for professional development in educational technology and them working at a primary school, $\rho(44) = -.430, p = .041$. The data also showed that 36% of the teachers participated in eTwinning, Erasmus+ exchange programs, and 86% of the teachers stated that they search online for ideas on how to improve their teaching. There was a positive correlation between teachers reporting that before COVID-19, they used to search online for ideas to improve their teaching practices and them reporting that they have received training on how to teach online, $\rho(42) = .463, p = .023$. Finally, as high as 80% of the participants of the study stated that they sampled various digital tools for classroom use. There was a positive correlation between teachers reporting that before COVID-19, they used to try out various digital tools for classroom use and them reporting that they have received training on how to teach online, $\rho(42) = .462, p = .023$. Despite the indication of high use and acceptance of educational technology, the participants indicated the need additional training in online teaching as displayed in Table 7:

Table 7. Feeling for the need of training in online teaching

Do you feel you need training in online teaching?	N	%
No	6	14%
Maybe	17	39%
Yes	21	48%

There was, however, a negative correlation between teachers feeling they need training in online teaching and higher qualifications of teachers, $\rho(44) = -.430, p = .041$.

The vast majority of the respondents preferred that their trainers were certified professionals (73%). The respondents specified the needed areas of additional training, as seen in Table 8. The highest needs lie in 1) Practical approaches to assessing learners online (78%), 2) Practical suggestions on online teaching practices (69%) and 3) Technical knowledge on using different online platforms (61%).

Table 8. Needs for additional training

Training needs	N	%
Technical knowledge on using different online platforms	22	61%
Online courses on specific teaching practices	19	53%
Practical approaches to assessing learners online	28	78%
A demonstration on how to pedagogically convert an onsite lesson into an online on	20	56%
Practical suggestions on online teaching practices	25	69%
Participation in teacher communities/events for professional development	19	53%

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown affected almost all aspects of society and everyday life, the entire globe needed to adjust and learn to organise their professional and personal life in a new way. This chapter displays our investigation on how early language educators adapted to online teaching during COVID-19 school closures in March 2020. Our research questions were concerned with how teachers dealt with challenges in these unknown territories and what factors could account for how they faced such challenges. According to the analysis of the survey, the participants' performance displays useful insights about areas of strength and weakness in their online teaching that potentially can be used to support individual future trainees in areas of teaching. The data show a representation of reality, where language professionals indicate the steps taken to rapidly transfer their teaching online, the lack of training and infrastructure and the confusion of one's ability to keep their heads above water when it comes to developing the necessary digital literacy.

More specifically, according to the data, there was confusion and hesitation during the process of transferring online, as teachers stated confidence regarding the use of digital tools, but hesitation when it came to applying them for pedagogical purposes, such as group work, feedback etc. The findings indicate that even though teachers were highly qualified, as the vast majority held postgraduate degrees,

they were inhibited by their fears of using technology and digital tools, unaware of the fact that “digital learning needs to be pedagogically led, and thus the key differences for success are the identification of digital competencies that teachers need and the provision of training to help them acquire their competences” (Carrier & Nye, 2017, p. 209). The lack of training brought limitations to the execution of the transfer and the teachers’ disbelief in the process and the outcomes of their new professional norm. There was a haze, and dare we say, misunderstanding of the use of digital tools and digital pedagogy as teachers and students stated they were confident using the tools for educational purposes, but when it came to teaching approaches that held a social and communicative element there was hesitation. Most importantly, the social and communicative elements that are not only vital to any language lessons, in any shape or form, but are also essential in times of emergency isolation and restrictions were compromised as teachers were unaware on how to apply teaching approaches in the remote learning environment that would embrace social and communicative learning. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the issue of resources also brought distress. According to the data, most of the respondents felt the need to create their own material and use EFL websites in order to work online, considering this to be in accordance with remote teaching. There was confusion regarding textbooks and the confusion of how they can be applied in an online environment, this confusion may be the reason why the majority of teachers turned to online EFL websites. This could be seen as a positive outcome, as the majority states that they would be using these resources when they return to the classroom, combined with their text-books.

The findings of the study confirm that we cannot expect teachers to instantly revise curriculum, teaching approaches, resources, and their pedagogical perspectives as they are being rushed online. Nonetheless, after the experience they have had and knowing what we now know, we cannot continue as normal. Our normal has changed. It would be unrealistic to expect to avoid upheaval entirely, nonetheless, as the data have shown, teachers need teacher education and need to become digitally literate in order to gain the confidence they deserve to cope in an ever changing world. There may be changes to the workstreams of teachers, administrators and others who support education as there is a need to learn and test out these new ways. This does not need to be negative, but it can give us hope that the field of education is working towards something solid and of high quality. While the data of this study indicates that the teachers were aware of important differences between teaching online and onsite, it must be mentioned that the teaching approaches in question are not fundamentally different as online education also supports teaching principles of good quality education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study highlight the need for increased training and knowledge around digital literacies for a smooth adoption of the new norm in language education in Cyprus and beyond. The lack of or limited digital literacies among practitioners in the specific context raises doubts regarding effectiveness of remote/online teaching functions in the way it was handled in the time of the COVID-19 crisis. The research described above can significantly influence the way educational leadership supports practitioners, evaluate their own online teaching, shed light on the needs of the current teaching situation in Cyprus, the lack of preparation beyond the familiar and the lack of understanding of digital literacy. Furthermore, objectives related to student learning online should be clarified, and teachers, teacher educators and policy makers should account for relevant competences needed for effective use of digital tools during further partial school closure and re-openings. This chapter has revealed specific factors in the

area of teacher competence, digital literacy and teacher education that impact practitioners' successful mastery of new challenges such as the one faced during the lockdowns of 2020. It also highlights the need to develop teacher competences in teaching in the digital era and preparing for it in initial teacher education and their further professional development. Preparing practitioners for digitalisation in their teaching is a chance that teacher education cannot neglect. Despite the promising findings of this study, the limitations should also be discussed. First, the results only reflect responses from the online survey the participants completed. Interviews were not conducted as the response rate for interviews were low due to the challenging times the teachers were facing during the start of the pandemic. There were planned follow-up questions, however, these were not possible after the researchers received the completed surveys.

The COVID-19 school closures and the rushed solution to ERT has highlighted the need for teacher education aligned with the digital times and schools' flexibility to unforeseen circumstances. A movement towards preparation, digital awareness and inclusive process of training that would empower language educators to work confidently and effectively. Such a change requires a shift to a more emancipatory underpinning philosophy of teacher education, which can confront the pedagogy of the present technical paradigm. The education community learned valuable lessons in this time, and it is our opinion that we need to take advantage of the lessons learned to equip teachers for an on-going crisis and take the opportunity for re-imagining to occur. By challenging the current crisis and skill-based orientation of teacher education programs, teacher educators in Cyprus and beyond can begin to embrace the constructs alluded to in this chapter.

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Digital Literacy in Language Education

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