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Authentic Speech and Pedagogical Transformation

Rethinking the Language Teacher's Role in the Technological Age

Introduction

In foreign language education, developing speaking skills is not purely a matter of choosing methods or technologies. The role of the teacher has undergone – and continues to undergo – a major transformation. According to the new expectations, language teachers must step back from the center of classroom interaction and reduce their own speaking time to make room for the development of students' communication skills (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Popovikj, 2019). Let's admit it: this shift is able to be emotionally taxing, as it runs counter to the traditional self-image of power, control, and visibility that is often central to the teaching profession. In this new pedagogical value system, pedagogical value no longer lies in the teacher's dominant presence. Instead, it lies in the teacher's ability to support students as active participants in communication. In this new language learning environment, however, as the teacher's role diminishes, access to authentic spoken language resources gets more and more valued. Interestingly, this phenomenon is not new: it has always been present in the history of language teaching, albeit to varying degrees. This historical perspective is interesting because it reveals that the technological and instrumental conditions – which often seem decisive in forming the pedagogical ecosystem – are secondary to pedagogical convictions. A good educator, a good language teacher, does not adapt their belief system to modern technology, but rather adapts modern technology to their belief system: they adapt the tool so that it serves didactic needs. If this were not the case, the burning issues of speech instruction would not continually emerge from the history of language education. Very few new tools have been able to permanently divert attention from the importance of live communication; one such example was the printed book, which understandably contributed to the rise of the grammar-translation method (Bárdos, 2025). However, the primacy of speech soon regained its dominance. It is interesting to note that, also in the early stages of sound recording, publications were already stimulating language learners to speak. Thus, the goal was never merely listening and comprehension, but the almost immediate translation of what was heard into practice.

Historical Perspective

Examining the historical development of language education not only enables an understanding of the emergence of contemporary language-teaching practices but also helps to see the legacy they carry. The methods employed in different historical periods reflect not only didactic solutions. They also reflect the cultural value systems, communicative norms, and conceptions of knowledge transmission characteristic of the societies in which they developed. The millennia-long history of language teaching is evidenced by the fact that bilingual dictionaries in the form of clay tablets have survived from the Sumerian civilization: the systematic learning and teaching of foreign languages constitutes one of the earliest layers of cultural heritage (Bárdos, 2025).

The language-pedagogical practices of the ancient Egyptians, as well as those of the Greeks and Romans, were likewise based on the primacy of orality. Through conquests and cultural encounters, these societies recognized that the acquisition of a foreign language was a means of gaining access to another culture, for which living, native speech provided the most authentic source. In societies where rhetorical knowledge and verbal intelligence were highly valued, speech-centred learning became established as a self-evident approach – one that persisted as a tradition over many centuries (Bárdos, 2025).

In the Middle Ages, with the widespread teaching of Latin, language learning became a mass phenomenon. Nevertheless, the primacy of orality persisted. In the early stages of increasingly formalized education, the teacher remained the primary source of knowledge transmission, as the scarcity of

books meant that grammatical instruction and translation practices were carried out largely through spoken interaction. Although the mass production of printed books introduced new proportions into the relationship between teacher and textbook, it nonetheless perpetuated the mindset of earlier models: the mediation of classical exemplars, the transmission of structured linguistic knowledge, and particular ways of conceptualizing the relationship to living speech (Schröder, 2018).

At the same time, historical analysis allows us to recognize that the legacy of speech-centred instruction – although it gradually lost some of its value – continues to function as a foundational principle in several language-pedagogical approaches throughout the centuries. The modern era, however, created a radically new situation. With the massification of language education, the situation changed fundamentally. The possibility for learners to acquire the target language naturally from native speakers has nearly disappeared. This was particularly true in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungary, where the majority of language teachers never encountered native speakers of the languages they taught. As a result, their knowledge related to spoken language was mediated through their own non-native teachers and through phonetic instruction (Medgyes, 1997).

For this reason, the emergence of modern technology represents not merely a contemporary pedagogical tool. It also constitutes the continuation and reinterpretation of the historical legacy of access to native speech sources. The new technology not only revolutionized access to authentic audio materials but also created new pedagogical possibilities. While the legacy outlined at the beginning of the first chapter – the primacy of native speech, the demand for authentic linguistic sources – became core values of language teaching, technological development made it possible for these pedagogical principles to be realized in new practical forms (Gilmore, 2019). With the advent of sound recording, learners gained access for the first time to native speech that did not require the physical presence of the speaker, thereby opening the way for pedagogical tasks that could simulate real communication. When used well, digital tools can support language learning, but if not, they may simply distract students. Therefore, teachers should carefully prepare and conclude digital-based lessons with reflection or discussion, as technology is only a tool that requires informed pedagogical use (Móser & Szűts, 2023).

It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the material conditions that made access to authentic speech possible. Throughout the 20th century and into the early 21st century, new generations of audio technology not only left their mark on teaching practices but also radically transformed the way native-language speech was recorded and preserved. They also transformed the way these audio materials were shared with students. From early phonograph records and institutional language labs to later cassettes, CD-ROMs, and digital media, each new medium created new pedagogical possibilities. These tools did more than simply convey speech. They organized listening practice, enabled repetition, and went even further: they helped shape students' relationship with the spoken language (Salaberry, 2001).

The earliest, widely used educational audio media were 78-rpm records. These predated by far what we now know as “modern” vinyl records. These recordings represented the first large-scale technological tool that made spoken language accessible for educational purposes (Salaberry, 2001). Despite notable technical limitations, these recordings sought to convey the target language as naturally as possible using native-speaker speech samples. Their pedagogical value lay in the fact that they made authentic pronunciation and intonation accessible to students even without direct contact with the target language.

Alongside the use of audio recordings, magnetic tape technology also spread rapidly. In this early phase, language instruction generally relied on a single classroom tape recorder: the class listened to the model sentences together. Nevertheless, the technology represented a decisive change, as it allowed for the repeated listening of spoken language in unlimited quantities and for controlled listening practice – that is, the ability to pause the audio at any point. Magnetic tape also opened up new possibilities for language learning outside of institutional settings (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

By the early 1950s, the first tape-based language courses designed specifically for home use had appeared. A notable example was the French language course published by the Vermont-based Tape Correspondence School (Tape Recording magazine, 1958), which sought to meet the needs of independent learners. The dialogues on the recordings included pauses, leaving room for student responses, followed by model answers. These early publications made the first tentative steps in autonomous language learning possible.

The widespread diffusion of magnetic tape in the 1950s and 1960s directly paved the way for the emergence of language laboratories. They were created to solve a persistent weakness of traditional classrooms. Individual students simply had too little time to speak and practice the language themselves (Bárdos, 2025). In language labs, students could work individually with headphones, listen to recordings of native speakers, record their own voices, and compare their own speech with the target-language recordings. The teacher could monitor multiple students at the same time. The language lab thus became not simply a technical tool but also a unique pedagogical space that supported individualized and differentiated learning. At the same time, its most important feature was that it strengthened students' direct connection to authentic spoken language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In the second half of the 20th century, sound recording technology kept evolving with the introduction of the compact cassette. Compared to earlier reel-to-reel systems, cassettes were more portable, more affordable, and more user-friendly. Language labs were primarily found inside educational institutions, but cassette technology made widespread home use possible. As a result, language learning expanded beyond schools and universities into everyday life. Learners were given the opportunity to take control of their own learning process: they could play back, pause, and rewind the recordings at will, at any time and for any duration. Such autonomy even more reinforced conversation-centred didactic approaches (Salaberry, 2001).

The cassette era of the 1970s and 1980s was followed by the rise of CD-ROM-based language learning programs in the late 1980s and 1990s. This transition marked a shift from analog, linear audio transmission to digital, programmable environments. Unlike cassettes, which offered only audio in a pre-recorded sequence, CD-ROMs integrated audio, text, images, and video. They also introduced branching structures that allowed learners to navigate using the keyboard. Although these programs were capable of recording and playing back the learner's speech, they were not yet able to understand or analyze it. Nevertheless, they represented the first real step toward interactive, computer-assisted language learning (Levy, 1997).

A significant qualitative leap occurred in interactivity with the development of speech recognition technologies, which moved from early systems limited to isolated words and a small vocabulary to increasingly sophisticated statistical approaches. Starting in the 2000s, advances in computing power and data availability transformed speech recognition into a large-scale, data-driven technology, trained on massive amounts of speech data and supported by cloud-based infrastructures.

Speech recognition first appeared in language learning software. It gave students feedback on how accurately they pronounced words. This was followed by web-based platforms and, later, mobile apps, which made speech practice portable and accessible anytime, anywhere. The result: live language interaction with digital systems has become part of students' daily lives. In recent years, technology has taken another leap forward: the combination of speech recognition and Large Language Models (specialized AI-systems) has created a new communication paradigm. Spoken input is no longer merely recorded and transcribed, but interpreted, contextualized, and responded to. As a result, today's AI-based systems are increasingly capable of simulating authentic conversational interaction (Juang & Rabiner, 2005).

From an educational standpoint, these technologies marked a genuine turning point. Earlier tools could only simulate human-to-human conversation, often in fairly limited ways, whereas modern systems,

by contrast, enable real verbal interaction and respond in real time. They can adapt learning paths to individual needs, which often helps sustain student motivation by offering consistent, data-driven evaluations of spoken performance. (Li et al., 2022). Overall, the historical development of these tools shows that there are ongoing, systemic efforts to preserve and expand access to authentic speech, even if the creation of the technology itself does not serve this purpose, at least not primarily. This is a secondary outcome, but for language teachers, it is also proof: the methods of language teaching from the past live on, speech-centred traditions remain with us; the only thing that changes is that we are following this path in increasingly modern and interactive forms.

Cultural Perspective

Technological shifts in the history of language education cannot be interpreted solely as innovations. These tools have always been embedded in the structures of collective memory that determine what a community considers valuable knowledge, which linguistic forms it preserves, and which communicative norms it passes on. Changes in language pedagogy can therefore be interpreted not only as processes in the history of education but also as processes of cultural memory.

Societies shape their self-image by transforming memories of the past into culture, thereby preserving their identity across generations. This process shapes not only collective history and institutionalized forms of memory, but also the pedagogical traditions through which knowledge is transmitted, including language education. The conversation-centred approach discussed in the previous chapter, the emphasis on authentic speech and input, and the changing role of the teacher all reflect how a society interprets itself: what it considers important in communication, what it chooses to preserve from the past, and how it approaches the transmission of knowledge (Assmann, 2011).

The history of language teaching is not merely a historical curiosity; it is a collection of established traditions that continue to shape teaching practices to this day. The focus on speaking and the importance of authentic sound are historical patterns that reflect a long-standing belief, rooted in collective experience, that language is, above all, spoken communication. The changing role of the teacher and the ongoing demand for authentic resources are also part of this tradition. This means that many of today's pedagogical decisions are not merely a response to current student needs or methodological expectations, but also a reflection of or adaptation to inherited cultural patterns.

However, this cultural heritage is not static, nor do traditions remain unchanged. Technological advances – from the printing press to sound recordings and later digital platforms – have repeatedly transformed the way student groups access authentic speech. However, the very belief that a true understanding of a language depends on access to authentic speech has been passed down for generations, even if the language teaching methods currently in vogue have not always made this their primary message (Gilmore, 2007). Today, regardless of language teaching methods, advances in media technology make access to authentic language materials widely and easily available, so the primacy of speech and communication is expected to continue to grow.

The fact that access to authentic language sources is of paramount importance is not merely a matter of language pedagogy. Indeed, the subtle nuances of meaning can only be expressed and interpreted if we know the language not only in a formal sense, but also through its use in natural contexts. In his work *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), Pierre Bourdieu refers to this mode of language use as a “scholastic perspective”: a stance in which the speaker is able to step outside the everyday, situation-bound automatisms of meaning-making and consciously examine the full range of a word's possible semantic nuances. This type of semantic analysis is not merely a linguistic operation but a fundamental form of sophisticated thinking, as it allows us to approach language not merely as a tool of communication but also as a complex network of meanings. If language education does not provide access to authentic sources, it cannot foster the sensitivity that is indispensable for this kind of meaning analysis. For this reason, in addition to the rationale outlined above, access to authentic, spoken language materials has become a central element of modern language pedagogy: for it develops not only communicative skills

but also a conscious, reflective way of thinking about language – that kind of analytical and interpretive “playfulness” in the realm of meaning that Austin, and later Bourdieu, wrote about.

As Vygotsky famously put it, “the relationship between thought and word is not a thing but a process – a continuous back-and-forth movement between thought and word, and between word and thought.” This theory, which describes this dynamic, reciprocal relationship, also clearly demonstrates that language is not merely a tool, but also the medium that shapes thought. Even the ancients and medieval scholars –who sent their students to the target-language country – recognized that the finer nuances of thought emerge through the use of living language. Preserving access to authentic speech as a historical value is therefore consistent with Vygotsky’s views on the interdependence of thought and language development: linguistic nuances and conceptual precision are mutually dependent.

Vygotsky’s other fundamental principle – that every higher-order psychological function appears twice: first in the social sphere (interpsychological), and later internalized in individual consciousness (intrapsychological) – is directly linked to discourse-centred language teaching goals. This developmental path, from the social to the individual, emphasizes that linguistic competence does not develop in isolation but is shaped through interactions and real-life communicative situations. This explains why authentic audio materials, real-life communication contexts, and exposure to various accents and speech styles are indispensable in language learning: these provide the social space from which individual language use and internal cognitive processes can later emerge.

Discussion

Ultimately, all of this leads to another important conclusion. Precisely because contemporary technologies now provide unprecedented, direct, and widespread access to authentic language input, there is a greater need than ever for the teacher’s transformed presence. The abundance of language materials available through digital platforms, apps, and AI-powered tools does not in itself guarantee meaningful learning. On the contrary, the sheer volume of available input can easily overwhelm learners, fragment their attention, or expose them to language use that is not necessarily relevant for them to master. Learners, therefore, still need guidance in selecting appropriate materials, interpreting nuances of meaning, recognizing context, maintaining motivation, and transforming passive language exposure into purposeful communication.

We should therefore interpret the redefinition of the teacher’s role mentioned in the introduction not as a reduction in significance, but quite the opposite: as a more complex and pedagogically indispensable presence. While in earlier eras the teacher’s primary task was to provide access to rarely available linguistic models, in today’s learning environment, it is increasingly becoming central to help students navigate the world of abundance. The teacher remains indispensable as an organizer of interaction, a mediator of meaning, a source of feedback, and as a supporter capable of responding to the emotional, social, and developmental needs that no technology can fully replace. Especially in the development of speech skills, there is a need for encouragement, correction, dialogue, and trust – conditions that are fundamentally rooted in human relationships.

In the current technological age, therefore, teachers are needed not less, but in a different way: not as the sole transmitters of linguistic knowledge, but as professional guides who accompany students through increasingly complex communicative environments. What may at first glance appear to be a departure from tradition is, in fact, the renewed fulfillment of a long-standing pedagogical logic. Just as technology brings authentic language use closer to the learner, it remains the teacher’s enduring task to ensure that this access translates into genuine understanding, active participation, and actual communicative competence.

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