

Looking into the Future of Language Learning and Technology with Carol A. Chapelle

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Abstract

In this reflective interview, Carol Chapelle traces her pioneering journey in language learning and technology (LLT), beginning in the late 1970s at the University of Illinois, where exposure to early computer-assisted language learning sparked her lifelong interest. Emphasizing that technology is an addition—not a replacement—for the human element in teaching, Chapelle discusses how evolving tools, including generative AI, both enhance and challenge pedagogical practice. She warns against misconceptions that students inherently know how to use technology for learning and that AI can replace educators. Instead, she advocates for equipping teachers with the expertise to guide students in leveraging technology productively. Chapelle highlights the importance of integrating LLT into teacher training and ongoing professional development. She also underscores the empowerment technology offers students, especially through access to cultural content and tools for linguistic analysis. For researchers, corpus linguistics exemplifies how technology transforms language study. Looking ahead, Chapelle foresees continued exploration of generative AI, acknowledging both its pedagogical potential and the uncertainty it introduces. Despite fears of AI replacing language education, she reaffirms the enduring human drive to learn language. This interview captures the evolving interplay between language, technology, and pedagogy from one of the field's most influential voices.

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¹Estela Ene: Dear Carol, thank you so much for finding time for this interview for the special issue of LTRQ that will honor your prolific career. You have worked in several important areas of applied linguistics. My questions are going to focus on language learning and technology. We'll reflect back and then try to project forward about language learning and technology (LLT).

My 1st question is, how did you develop an interest in language learning and technology? Were there professional role models or specific pieces of research that you were aware of, that really piqued your interest in LLT?

Carol Chapelle: Well, it was really not research, but practice that brought me into this area. And it was a long time ago. It was in the late 1970s. I was at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and that was that was one of two universities that had big projects experimenting with how computers could be used in education, education in general. At both sites, language learning – foreign language learning and ESL – were part of this big educational picture that was developing to try to understand how the technologies could be used. I was working on my Master's degree at the time in TESOL. The class that I was teaching was in the intensive English program. Part of the class was for students to spend two hours in the computer lab. It was this firsthand view of the students spending that time in such interactivity that piqued my interest. The materials were not sophisticated compared to what the students were doing in class. There was just so much interaction! I didn't see the computer activities as a replacement for class, but the technology seemed to me like a really valuable addition. The activities in the computer lab did not seem like a replacement for other kind of homework either, but just an added opportunity to interact with the language and get more exposure, get immediate feedback, and for some students to get really interested. The technology was brand new, and students were coming from every place in the world. No one had ever seen anything like this. So, there was an element of fascination. And that's an aspect of technology and language learning that remains, because the technology keeps developing. There's always something new.

Estela Ene: Agreed! In fact, the question of whether technology is an addition to in-person teaching or a replacement fascinates me, too. You have entertained this question in much of your work. Every time, you concluded that technology is definitely not a replacement of the human element (see, for example, Chapelle (2024); Chapelle (2001)). I wonder, with the emergence of AI and other advancements in technology at this “point of inflection” (Chapelle, 2024), is your opinion changing?

Carol Chapelle: It's the perennial question with technology, isn't it? And the answer is always the same. It is human language that we're teaching, and so humans need to play a role in that. I think what changes is the roles that the technology can play based on the

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functionalities that keep developing. These really make us rethink, explore, reconsider, and invent new tasks and ways of helping the students to benefit from it. Generative AI comes along with new potentials, but it really has some dangers too if students are using it to produce language for them rather than to help them learn language. So, the opportunity and challenge with generative AI are both quite large.

Estela Ene: Based on your experience, what are the most important considerations that a practitioner who uses technology (whether AI or other) should be mindful of?

Carol Chapelle: The top consideration is the recognition of the connection between technology and language throughout society. That's bigger than anything we do in language teaching. Technology is used so pervasively in communication, in language analysis, and in people's everyday work with language. That recognition helps us in thinking about what we do in language teaching. Students live out there in the real world where they've got their phones and social media, and all these practices of communication. They've got their other classes where they're using technologies, they're experiencing other classes through learning management systems, and they're doing projects with multimedia. Their use of technology should play a role in our planning how we can help students to integrate their language with their technology use in a productive way.

Related to that, teachers need to recognize that students are using technologies, but they're not using them for language learning necessarily. Students need the teachers' expertise in how you learn language and how you can use technology to support language learning. We have to remember that we know how people learn languages, and that's not something that most students know. Making that connection for the students, to build good practices for language learning as they're using the technology, is important.

Estela Ene: What do you think programs that prepare language teachers can do to help teachers understand and maybe change their positionality towards technology (Chapelle, 2003), and just be better prepared to cope with the fast advancements we see?

Carol Chapelle: It's important today to have technology integrated into the courses in a master's program, or even in undergraduate courses. As teacher educators, we need to teach our future teachers that technology is part of what we do. In addition to that, there are professional development courses. We teach one of them through the State Department called Using Educational Technology for English Language Teaching. It provides teachers throughout the world eight modules where we go through and show what you can do with technology for teaching reading, listening, writing, etc. It also teaches how people learn to read, listen, and write so the course makes connections between technology and the specifics of language learning for teachers. Professional development is important at the beginning stages of education, but also going forward.

Estela Ene: What are some myths about language learning and technology that you would like to debunk?

Carol Chapelle: The most problematic myth is probably the idea that the students know all about the technology already. Additionally, today, anyone who has looked at generative AI or who has experienced a conversation with ChatGPT seems to conclude that the generative AI can do anything, and that is a myth.

Estela Ene: So as far as language learning, what limitations does AI come with?

Carol Chapelle: I don't think we really know the limitations. At first glance, some teachers seem to think AI can do anything, and therefore it can grade their essays, or it can teach their students, or perform any number of human functions. Another belief expressed by many teachers is that if students have access to AI, they will all use it to cheat by having AI write for them. Our experience is that some but not all students may be inclined do that. But this means that teachers should be helping students learn to learn through the use of AI by showing them how they can benefit from getting help from it rather than letting it block their opportunity to learn. AI clearly offers some interesting challenges and opportunities. Our Technology for Second Language Learning conferences over the past two years have hosted discussion of these issues. Papers from the 2023 conference can be found in our edited collection (Chapelle, Beckett & Ranalli 2024).

Estela Ene: Of all the many projects you've conducted as a researcher, which one is your favorite and why?

Carol Chapelle: I think it's hard to choose, because different projects do different things. For a class of projects, it's probably working with external entities that stands out. I've worked with Educational Testing Services, with Pearson education, and I'm currently working with the Defense Language Institute. As an applied linguist, I value being able to provide expertise that people see as needed and to contribute to creating, making sense of, and improving on what people are doing in the real world. Our global online course designed for teachers all over the world, for example, is extremely satisfying. I like projects in which I can apply applied linguistics in interaction with helping different kinds of programs and products meet their goals.

Estela Ene: I feel very much the same: applied linguists crave application. Thinking more broadly and into the future, can you elaborate on how the roles of students, teachers, and researchers are changing because of technology, and maybe in particular, because of generative AI in language teaching?

Carol Chapelle: I think of technology as empowering for students. Here we have to point out, as I often do, technology isn't just one thing. There are so many different types of technology, so many different functionalities. Some of the characteristics of technology that I see as really powerful for students is that it increases their ability to access cultural materials and people in remote locations. The networked aspect of technology and the fact that there's so much out there to explore and learn from provides students with such a wealth of information in the language they are studying. A student who wants to participate in the language that they're learning can do so without going on study abroad. It takes some skill and some ingenuity, but the technology allows it to happen. I know students who come to our program, who have never been out of their country. They have learned in an EFL context all their lives, but they participated in fan fiction, they accessed online resources, and they participated in activities in online chat rooms, for example. Technology really gives students with the know-how and drive the opportunity to move forward with their own learning.

In addition, the tools for analysis of language empower learners. When students learn how the technology can be used to access, analyze and understand language, there are so many things that they can do. The level of access has come such a long way from when you had to go to the language lab that had that one connection to the media stream from the language source that you were interested in.

I could just extend that to teachers. I remember carrying around bags of realia. My French teacher would bring in the menu that she got when she visited Paris. And then there was a newspaper that came from Russia. How precious those kind of artifacts were! One can see the value and excitement of the technology if you remember the time when teachers just didn't have those connections.

There are also many more materials for making the class more lively, integrated, and motivating. There are so many things that students can access as listening and reading prompts to develop a content theme in the target language. The media potentials are just amazing.

Teachers need to be educated in a way that makes using those materials normal. That's what makes teaching and learning with technology exciting.

In research, probably the most interesting and important aspect that that I see is the work that's done in corpus linguistics, where language analysis has taken advantage of the technology in such important ways to really give us a better understanding of language. We are able to see formulaic sequences that are so important for learning, work with collections of texts, and access examples that we can manipulate and analyze quantitatively and qualitatively, in ways that used to be impossible. Technology makes so much possible; it also creates that potential for connecting research with teaching. What

a researcher can do with electronic texts can be taught to students, so that they can have those skills for the rest of their lives.

Estela Ene: When you try to look into the future of language learning and technology, what do you see?

Carol Chapelle: In the immediate future, I see teachers, researchers, applied linguists trying to understand better what the generative AI offers. That is a pretty big challenge, especially because the AI keeps changing. I see a continued quest for understanding. I hope that we'll be able to provide good pedagogies to help students benefit from generative AI. I'm aware of colleagues who see this as the end of language teaching, not only because the students won't need us, but because the students won't want us. The idea is that today's students are going to have generative AI do their communication for them. I don't see that happening due to the fact that language is human, and humans want to learn language for many reasons beyond asking directions to the subway and ordering dinner at a restaurant.

Also in the near future, I see a lot of uncertainty because, if you look out of the classroom and into the world, we hear projections of all the things that AI is going to do that humans won't be needed for anymore. Language teaching is on those lists. However, here on the ground that projection doesn't seem realistic to me.

Estela Ene: On that positive note, allow me to thank you for this interview. I really enjoyed this conversation! Many thanks for your time and for sharing your thoughts!

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