



The emotional landscape of applied linguistics in digital spaces: Theories, research, and praxis

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Abstract

In this Editorial, we introduce the Special Issue, emphasizing the need to critically explore how digital learning environments affect language educators' and learners' emotional experiences. With digital technologies increasingly integrated into language education, emotions such as anxiety, frustration, enthusiasm, and isolation have gained prominence, reshaping pedagogical approaches and interactions. The papers included in this issue draw upon diverse theoretical frameworks and methodologies, providing empirical and conceptual insights into emotional challenges and opportunities faced in digitally mediated classrooms. Topics addressed range from learners' coping strategies and emotional regulation to educators' emotion(al) labor, emotions associated with peer feedback modalities, intercultural communication, and AI-driven conversational agents. Collectively, these contributions highlight the necessity of understanding emotional dynamics to enhance language education's effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. By foregrounding emotions within digital applied linguistics, this Special Issue underscores their pivotal role in shaping future research, policy, and practice in the field.

Keywords: emotional labor, digital applied linguistics, online language education, emotion regulation, teacher well-being, digital pedagogy

Preamble

In June 2025, I, Luis Javier (one of this Special Issue's guest editors), was invited to deliver a keynote at a conference focused on technology in language education. The audience included experienced language educators, many of whom made their reservations clear before I even began. Some voiced their concerns openly; others communicated them through body language—arms

crossed, guarded expressions, and distant eyes. One teacher spoke up during a small-group discussion and shared, almost with resignation, that their institution now requires them to integrate technology and digital elements into every course, regardless of subject or student need. The change felt forced, not collaborative.

At one point in the keynote, I asked a simple question: “Should technology be included in language education or should we ignore it?” What followed was not just a conversation about tools and platforms, but about identity, agency, and change. One participant reflected on feeling like a novice again after decades of teaching, while another questioned whether students were truly benefiting or just being entertained. The room carried a mix of fatigue, confusion, and concern. Witnessing this, I cited the World Economic Forum’s (WEF; 2025) report, which helped reframe the dialogue. I remember saying, “As educators, we have to remember that we are preparing students for the future, not our future, but *theirs*.” Some teachers in the audience nodded in agreement, while others nodded with a resignation that revealed the emotional weight of adapting to a reality they didn’t choose but now had to navigate.

Introduction

We begin this Editorial with a preamble to vividly depict that, whether we embrace or resist it, digital integration is already shaping how educators feel, respond, and navigate their roles. In recent years, the digital landscape has seen an exponential expansion, weaving its way into various facets of society and, notably, education (Selwyn, 2016; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). The proliferation of virtual learning environments, online collaboration platforms, and digital communication tools, which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nowfeek & Rupasinghe, 2022), has signaled a paradigm shift in the way education is conceptualized and delivered (Prensky, 2001; Siemens, 2014). As these digital spaces steadily permeate educational practices, they invariably introduce a multitude of novel experiences—both cognitive and affective—that learners and educators navigate (Collins & Halverson, 2018; Salama & Hinton, 2023). These virtual environments are not mere replicas of traditional classrooms; instead, they engender unique interaction dynamics, cultural exchanges, and emotional resonances (Chun, 2015; O’Dowd, 2021). Such sweeping transformations in the field of education directly affect the field of applied linguistics, underscoring the need to understand and critically examine the intertwined nature of emotions and linguistic interactions within these evolving digital realms (Bhatt, 2023).

The ascendancy of digital platforms in applied linguistics has engendered a transformation in learning dynamics (Hafner et al., 2015), ushering in an era where emotions have become intricately interwoven with digital interfaces (Kruk & Pawlak, 2022). As applied linguistics evolves to embrace online modalities—from language apps to virtual classrooms—it is imperative to understand the affective dimensions of these spaces deeply. Building upon the ‘affective turn’ highlighted by scholars like Pavlenko (2013), there is an emergent necessity to integrate the exploration of emotional constructs within the digital realms of applied linguistics. While much has been explored about the emotional intricacies of language teaching and learning in physical spaces (e.g., Benesch, 2017; Gkonou et al., 2020; Martínez Agudo, 2018; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022), digital platforms present novel emotional terrains that are relatively uncharted. The growing significance of virtual environments in contemporary society underscores the need to navigate these new emotional landscapes.

Despite the surge in research addressing emotions in applied linguistics, including multiple special issues dedicated to intersectional views on emotions, such as, for example, the *Language Learning Journal* (Coffey & De Costa, 2023) and the *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics* (De Costa et al., 2019), a focused exploration into their role and impact within digital environments

remains scant in the field. Digital settings introduce unique challenges and experiences, ranging from the anonymity of online interactions to the paradox of feeling isolated in virtual crowds. These new realities resulting from the interaction of language in digital spaces have organically expanded the scope of applied linguistics. This shift has led to the emergence of, for example, digital linguistics, a growing interdisciplinary field at the intersection of linguistics, information technology, and social sciences (Tokumaru, 2019). The necessity for such a field stems from the digital revolution's sweeping changes, which have introduced complex emotional experiences that traditional applied linguistics had not yet accounted for. Scholars are now beginning to map this new terrain, recognizing the importance of understanding language use in digital communication as distinct from traditional face-to-face interactions (Bhatt, 2023).

The convergence of linguistic practice with digital communication has spotlighted the affective dimension of online language use, necessitating a fresh examination of how emotions are expressed and interpreted in these spaces. As we know, emotions play a critical role in cognitive processes and learning outcomes, and their influence is magnified in digital settings where non-verbal cues and physical presence are absent (Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Additionally, access or lack of access to digital tools potentially creates an imbalance in the teaching and learning environment (Darvin, 2023), which is conducive to the emergence of undesired emotions, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of how digital divides impact emotional experiences in language education. By addressing these emotional dimensions, applied linguistics can contribute to the development of more equitable, accessible, and empathetic digital learning environments. This exploration is critical not only for enhancing the effectiveness of language education but also for ensuring that it is inclusive and responsive to the diverse emotional needs of learners in a digitally interconnected world.

Investigating the emotional dimensions of digital learning not only fills a scholarly gap but also has practical implications for designing more effective and emotionally supportive educational technologies. Understanding these emotional landscapes can lead to improved learner engagement, retention, and success in language learning within digital platforms. It is vital, therefore, that research in applied linguistics expands its scope to encompass the complexities of affective factors in digital language education, thereby enriching both the theoretical understanding and practical applications of linguistic pedagogy in the digital age. Furthermore, it is pivotal for contemporary research in applied linguistics to capture these nuanced emotional experiences and to examine how they shape language teaching, research, acquisition, and usage. This is especially pertinent in our increasingly multicultural and digitally interconnected world, where language education transcends traditional boundaries to embrace the diverse needs of language users.

This Special Issue emerged from a space of tension, curiosity, and care, building upon our previous work on teacher emotions as personal and professional development in applied linguistics (Karimi et al., 2025). By inviting researchers and practitioners into dialogue about the emotional dimensions of digital language education, we aimed to highlight challenges while also exploring possibilities for the road ahead. As guest editors, we view this issue as a beginning and a conversation starter. Thus, we hope it would inspire future scholarship to continue examining how emotional experiences shape, and are shaped by, the evolving digital ecosystems of applied linguistics.

Why this Special Issue, Why Now?

The years surrounding large-scale shifts to remote and hybrid instruction revealed how quickly digital infrastructures could reconfigure language education (Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021; Salama & Hinton, 2023). Even as many institutions returned to in-person formats, from the

pandemic-driven transition to online teaching and learning, digital platforms did not recede. Learning management systems, video conferencing, AI-supported feedback, learning analytics, and mandated technology adoption remain integral to program expectations, and their use is expected to increase in future years (Hodges et al., 2020; WEF, 2025). For many language educators, these changes have carried emotional consequences: role realignment, feelings of surveillance, loss of pedagogical autonomy, and uncertainty about instructional quality (Thumvichit, 2025; Xu et al., 2024). The Preamble we shared at the beginning of this Editorial, which is a real-life story, illustrates this lived reality. Teachers who built careers around relational, in-person practice are now negotiating screen-mediated presence, fluctuating student engagement signals, and institutional reporting requirements tied to digital metrics. At the same time, educators who entered the profession during or right after the pandemic were only familiar with digital or hybrid teaching environments early on in their careers. These contrasting experiences may have created a complex emotional landscape shaped by both nostalgia and adaptation. The result is a widely shared but differently experienced emotional landscape that calls for scholarly attention grounded in actual classroom and program conditions.

While research on language teacher and learner emotions has grown, much of the current literature still reflects pre-platform or primarily face-to-face instructional assumptions. Meanwhile, practitioners are making daily decisions in digital spaces that shape emotional climates: camera policies, chat participation norms, asynchronous workload, automated feedback tone, and the handling of connectivity inequities. These decisions influence belonging, vulnerability, risk-taking in target language use, and perceived legitimacy as multilingual speakers. Gaps widen when institutions mandate the adoption of technology without parallel attention to teacher preparation and emotional support (Xu et al., 2024). Digital divides—of bandwidth, device access, and platform familiarity—compound these tensions and can concentrate frustration among historically underserved student and teacher populations. Mapping these affective inequities is essential if applied linguistics is to inform ethical, inclusive, and sustainable digital language education.

Contributions to this Special Issue

The opening article in this Special Issue, *EFL [English as a foreign language] learners' emotional challenges and the associated coping mechanisms in online and hybrid learning contexts: A narrative inquiry* by Karimi and Ashkani (2025), presents a timely and in-depth narrative inquiry into the emotional experiences of university-level EFL students in Iran. Drawing on written narratives and follow-up interviews with participants transitioning from emergency remote learning to hybrid and traditional classroom settings, the study explores key emotional responses—particularly anxiety and frustration—alongside the coping strategies students developed over time. The findings are organized around five thematic areas, including emotional reactions to technology, development of coping strategies, the role of instructor support, the influence of external factors, and students' growth in emotional resilience. Particularly compelling are the learners' reflections on how digital challenges initially provoked emotional withdrawal but gradually fostered strategic adaptation and confidence. This contribution offers valuable insight into how learners navigate emotional turbulence in digitally mediated environments and highlights the critical need for institutional, pedagogical, and emotional support as students continue to move between learning modalities.

The second contribution, co-written by Ng and Cheung (2025), provides a comprehensive and timely synthesis of research on the affective dimensions of online English language education, addressing a growing yet underexplored intersection in applied linguistics. By analyzing 40 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2024, the authors identify a wide spectrum

of emotional experiences—ranging from boredom, anxiety, and emotional labor to enjoyment and emotional intelligence—across diverse learner and teacher populations in virtual learning environments. The study offers a critical mapping of theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and pedagogical practices used to study emotions in online English education. Notably, Ng and Cheung highlight how constructs such as emotion regulation and foreign language enjoyment (FLE) have evolved in digital spaces, while proposing emotionally responsive practices, including emotional scaffolding, teacher training, and technology-supported interventions. This synthesis makes a valuable contribution by bridging theory and praxis, urging educators and researchers to consider emotions not as incidental but as central to shaping equitable, sustainable, and humanizing digital language learning environments.

In the third contribution, Şan and Atay (2025) explore a compelling intersection between dialogic pedagogy, positive psychology, and second language acquisition. The study introduces a 14-week dialogic second language (L2) intervention situated within an interactive digital space—Google Classroom—designed to enhance the social emotional wellbeing (SEW) of young adult English language learners in a competitive Turkish university. Şan and Atay investigated how sustained, meaningful dialogue on socially relevant, often sensitive, topics can foster positive emotions, engagement, interpersonal relationships, and personal growth among learners. Using an embedded experimental design with both quantitative and qualitative components, the authors report a statistically significant improvement in the wellbeing of students who participated in the dialogic intervention, compared to a control group. Participants noted increased FLE, enhanced self-efficacy, and a greater sense of autonomy—all core tenets of positive psychology. Notably, learners also emphasized the emotional support and community-building aspects of the digital dialogues, illustrating how dialogic spaces can create caring, inclusive environments even in academically and socioeconomically demanding contexts.

In their conceptual exploration, *Chatting with AI Capone: Leveraging virtual conversational agents in emotional landscapes*, Sriganesh and Eamer (2025) critically examine how artificial intelligence (AI)–driven language learning applications engage (or fail to engage) learners in emotionally and culturally rich interactions. While much of the existing research on language learning apps focuses on cognitive outcomes such as vocabulary and grammar acquisition, this article shifts attention to the non-cognitive domains of social, emotional, and intercultural competence. Drawing on various theoretical models, the authors argue that language learning apps often underutilize the full affordances of natural language processing (NLP) and AI-driven conversational agents. Through an analysis of three widely used platforms—Duolingo, ImmerseMe, and MakesYouFluent—they demonstrate the potential for fostering emotional intelligence, empathy, and sociolinguistic agility that is often overlooked. The piece ultimately calls for more intentional design of emotionally responsive AI interactions that reflect the complexity of real-world language use and communication.

In the next contribution, Aslan (2025) explores the emotional dimensions of peer feedback modalities in English language teaching (ELT), offering a compelling contribution to the evolving landscape of language pedagogy. The study comparatively investigates face-to-face and digital peer feedback formats through a convergent mixed-methods design involving 115 undergraduate ELT students. By integrating survey data, focus group interviews, field observations, and reflective writing, Aslan uncovers distinct emotional patterns: while face-to-face feedback fosters higher enthusiasm and interpersonal engagement, it also heightens anxiety; conversely, digital feedback provides a less stressful and more reflective space, albeit at the cost of immediacy and emotional connection. The findings suggest that a hybrid model—combining the strengths of both modalities—may optimize learner engagement and emotional wellness. Situated within appraisal theory and the affective turn in applied linguistics, this research shifts

the focus from feedback as purely cognitive to a more holistic, emotionally responsive framework. It holds critical pedagogical implications for designing emotionally supportive, feedback-rich ELT environments.

In her contribution, *Fostering SEL competencies in digital learning environments: A COIL approach*, Yashenkova (2025) examines the role of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as a platform for developing SEL competencies in language education. Drawing on a mixed-methods study involving pre- and post-intervention surveys, reflective journals, and self-assessment tools, the research examines how Ukrainian, Dutch, and Belgian university students co-constructed meaning, navigated emotional and intercultural challenges, and developed empathy, resilience, and intercultural awareness through digitally mediated collaboration. Yashenkova's findings highlight that SEL competencies were not only fostered through direct instruction but also emerged organically via authentic, task-based intercultural engagement. Particularly notable is the emphasis on emotional regulation, self-awareness, and perspective-taking, which became crucial for navigating linguistic and cultural complexities in a time of global uncertainty. This paper contributes a compelling case for integrating SEL frameworks into international virtual exchange, reinforcing the potential of COIL as a pedagogical model for promoting emotional literacy in digital applied linguistics (Yashenkova, 2025).

In the last contribution of this Special Issue, *Exploring the emotional labor of Iranian English language teachers in digital learning environments: A self-determination theory perspective*, Ismail Xodabande, Ali Basarati, and Behzad Mansouri (2025) investigate how Iranian English language teachers experience and manage emotional labor within digital educational contexts. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, the study qualitatively explores the emotional regulation strategies (i.e., surface acting, deep acting, and natural emotional expression) used by ten mid-career teachers. Specifically, it examines how the fulfillment or frustration of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness shapes teachers' emotional experiences online. Findings reveal that enhanced autonomy and digital competence encourage emotional authenticity, whereas institutional pressures and technological difficulties frequently result in surface acting. Despite inherent relational challenges in digital teaching, teachers actively strive to build meaningful student connections, emphasizing relatedness as crucial for sustaining their emotional well-being. This paper thus offers theoretical and practical insights into emotional labor in digital language education, informing institutional policies and professional development initiatives.

Final Thoughts

The contributions presented in this Special Issue underscore the significance of emotional experiences in digital language education. As technology integration deepens, language educators and language learners encounter unique emotional landscapes requiring adaptive responses and innovative strategies. The research discussed throughout this Special Issue highlights that addressing emotions in digital spaces involves fostering emotional intelligence, promoting authentic emotional expression, and ensuring support mechanisms at institutional and pedagogical levels. Educational stakeholders must prioritize emotional well-being alongside cognitive and technological advancements to create effective and humanizing learning environments. Future scholarship should continue exploring these emotional dimensions, considering diverse contexts and stakeholders' voices, to better understand and address the complexities involved. Ultimately, attending to emotions within digitally mediated language education enriches educational practices and policies, ensuring they are responsive to the dynamic and interconnected world in which learners and educators increasingly operate.

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