

Commentary

The Deskillling of Language Teachers via Surveillance and Automation: A Critical Narrative Review

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Abstract

As a language teacher in post-secondary settings, I have noticed the increased gigification and automation of my work through precarious employment and delivery of pre-curated course modules. This made me question the uncritical adoption of technology within my field, which has come at the expense of teacher and student privacy. The commodification of language teaching has led to the packaging of courses, activities, services and promises in educational technologies in the form of apps, hardware, software, and innumerable websites marketed to students, teachers, and institutions. Although many edtech tools have facilitated language teaching, they have come with risks to our privacy, freedoms, and jobs. Many edtech tools collect information about us, breaching our privacy and surveilling how we interact in digital spaces. Drawing on literature from the education and other disciplines, I attempt to explain one potentially overlooked impact of edtech on language teaching. From a critical applied linguistics lens, this diminishes our control over our labour. Whoever has access to this information yields power over our labour where our digital interactions with our students are reduced to clicks and metrics, deprived of human interaction as we relinquish control over our labour. Information collected by edtech can also be used to automate aspects of teaching, deskill our profession, and reduce our agency. Thus, possibly contributing to the precarious employment landscape marring the field of English language teaching. This paper calls for a more critical evaluation of edtech in language education. This is also a call for more transparent practices in how edtech uses the information it collects about us, through policy changes and improved digital literacy in our field.

Keywords

Deskillling, Language Teachers, ELT, Surveillance, Edtech, Deprofessionalization, CALL

1. Introduction

As a language teacher, I had always taken pride in being an early adopter of technology in my classroom. I would search for computer and mobile programs to facilitate language teaching and learning, test them in my classroom, and selectively integrate them into my teaching. However, as concerns with digital privacy started to emerge in popular media [1, 2], I began to question my own privacy, and how I may be un-

wittingly compromising my students' privacy by asking them to complete online activities. Despite the proliferation of educational technologies in language teaching and the commodification of language [3, 4], it seemed that teacher and student privacy and safety were overlooked or dismissed. At the same time, I have repeatedly seen how packaged online courses are distributed to teachers for delivery in ways that

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undermine their professional agency and beliefs. Although they are pushed onto teachers under the guise of saving time and effort, they undermine the value of teachers' planning, preparation, and interaction with students. These manifestations of neoliberal valuation of efficiency mean teachers are contracted for shorter periods for fewer hours. As a result, there needs to be a critical interrogation of the proliferation of edtech in language teaching and learning. A handful of language teaching and education scholars have discussed the problematic ethical concerns related to data privacy in edtech [5-7]; however, I believe this has not received sufficient attention. The lack of literature in this area within language teaching was indicative of the need for initiating discussions surrounding the ethical impact and practices of edtech. I hope to shed light on how language teachers are affected by surveillance through the deskilling of their roles and the consequent automation and job loss, drawing on literature from different education sectors to spark discussion about edtech.

The nature of language teachers' roles has changed with the rise of educational technologies (edtech). Edtech refers to "digital technology in education" and is "industry and commercially available digital technologies used by teachers and learners for the means and ends of something called 'education'" [8]. However, these technologies have not always yielded positive outcomes for students and teachers [5]. Edtech has introduced new ways to surveil teachers and measure their performance. It has degraded teacher agency through standardizing course packages and reduced their roles to platform monitors. The "transformation of highly skilled work into highly unskilled work", or deskilling [9], leads to the deprofessionalization of language teaching and the gradual automation of jobs. Not surprisingly, most language teachers work in precarious roles with little job and financial security [10, 11]. This has a negative effect on teachers' agency, professional identities, and livelihoods [12-15]. This paper is not a critique of edtech pedagogical efficacy. Rather, I hope to highlight the ethical concerns that may be overlooked in professional decisions surrounding the adoption of new educational technologies. This paper examines the potential impact of edtech on teacher privacy and deprofessionalization.

Drawing on a critical applied linguistics lens (CALx), I highlight the potential inequalities and socio-economic disparities that may emerge from the unchecked violation of language teachers' professional and personal privacy. Critical applied linguistics is the application of critical theory within the field of applied linguistics as a theoretical framework and a lens for the identification and analysis of power dynamics resulting from language use, language learning, and language teaching. CALx is promoted as a way to critique mainstream and northern perspectives in applied linguistics [16]. Critical work, more generally, involves the "analysis of inequitable work conditions, the functioning of capitalism, the role of ideology, and an understanding of society as conflictual rather than consensual" [16]. Among the guiding principles of

CALx is the critique of normative knowledge and practices and the consequent ethical responsibility for rejecting oppressive structures and ideologies that may be accepted as the status quo [16]. Thus, I have adapted a CALx lens for this literature review to frame my reflections.

In this literature review, I attempt to explain and critically interrogate how the online tracking of our data affects language teachers' work, their agency, and the profession. In the first section, I will describe how data is tracked, used, and exchanged. The second section postulates how this data may be used to degrade language teacher agency through surveillance and deskilling. The last section offers possibilities for resistance and action.

2. Data Tracking

Everything we do online is tracked through platforms or cookies that collect data about how we interact online. The data collected about us include online content interactions, people we associate with, search history, biometrics, geolocations, IP addresses, facial tracking, photos, videos, voice prints, user profiles, and device identifications [17-21]. The private sector monetizes this information by selling it to third parties, data brokers, or marketing companies. This data is then used for targeted advertising, or sometimes for more sinister purposes. Similarly, educational institutions collect a large amount of data about teachers and students. They then use this information to monitor teacher activities and student progress. This form of surveillance allows the policing of teachers while identifying online interactions that could be automated [8, 17].

One of the major concerns is the sheer volume of data being collected about us. Because of the amount of data that's collected, it is hard to anonymize our online presence. Data from individual websites may be anonymized before selling or sharing it with other parties; however, it is not difficult to triangulate people's information once the data pieces from several companies are collated [20]. All this information collected about us is sold to data brokers who sell this data to the highest bidders, which may include governments and law enforcement. Geolocation data includes precise information about our location, location history, and routines. This data is impossible to anonymize when curated. Law enforcement agencies have a history of purchasing this data to crack down on crime and civil liberties. For example, it may be used to monitor those who attend protests. In fact, it is not uncommon to read news about teachers who were fired or charged for attending protests that align with their ethical and political beliefs, thus restricting teachers' rights and freedom [22, 23].

Different education sectors have been concerned about the role of edtech in promoting the surveillance and deskilling of teachers. However, similar attention has not been given to language education despite the proliferation of language-teaching technologies. Edtech, or the "industry and commercially available digital technologies used by teachers

and learners for the means and ends of something called ‘education’” [8], has become a staple in language teaching. Current language teaching standards include educational technologies as part of their assessment of good language teaching (see TESL Ontario, 2021) [24]. Recommendations for integrating technology in language classrooms are commonplace despite the lack of evidence to show its efficacy compared to traditional classroom experiences [5]. While institutions and researchers have been pushing teachers to adopt more technology in their practice, their data is being collected via these same platforms and weaponized against them [8]. Even language teacher professional associations seem to ignore the role of edtech in the deprofessionalization of language teaching. In addition, language teacher associations have not noticeably raised concerns about how edtech threatens teachers’ privacy, professional identities, or jobs.

Our data is constantly being collected online, and it is unclear how it is used. Similarly, there is a lack of transparency in how the data collected in digital educational spaces is used. CALx raises the need to interrogate power, identify who holds power, how it is used, and what its effects are on those dominated by that power. Domination refers to the social and systemic injustice resulting from the exercise of power by one group over another [16]. It can be any hegemonic relationship where one group yields political, cultural, or economic power over another. These power relations involve complex dynamics of influence and control over weaker groups, thus establishing norms and shaping society to benefit the dominant group. Language teachers have no control over who collects their data, who owns it, and how it is used. This disparity in ownership is not to the benefit of teachers. Access to this data yields the possibility of power and control, yet the unequal and unethical access to this data is accepted as the status quo.

3. Surveillance and Data Markets

Edtech companies or institutions continuously exploit language teachers’ and students’ data. When teachers use platforms purchased by their institutions, their data becomes the institution’s property [25]. Institutions could use this data to monitor teachers and their students’ progress, or they can monetize it by selling it on data markets. On the other hand, when teachers use third-party software, like free apps, with their students, their data becomes vulnerable on the entire World Wide Web. Free tools and apps carry additional risks because they explicitly exploit user data. Technology companies that provide free-to-use tools profit by selling user data and exploiting the information provided by the user on their platforms [18, 21, 25]. For example, Canva uses invasive surveillance and collects user information, exploiting students’ and teachers’ intellectual property and contributions [26]. Whether teachers use institutionally purchased software or free-to-use edtech, teachers are not the customers of the edtech services. As a result, there are no tangible accounta-

bility measures for how teachers’ data is used.

O’Neill (2023) presents Microsoft’s marketing communication for promoting the “Lighthouse Project” to New Zealand’s Ministry of Education, which was acquired through New Zealand’s Official Information Act. In this communication, Microsoft promoted their new education analytics that would provide the ministry with live reports on students and teachers. The education analytics would allow schools to see “how engagement patterns are changing over time” and “where teachers may need training and professional development” (p. 181). In essence, teachers would be continuously monitored and assessed to ensure their compliance and productivity. The project was being marketed privately to New Zealand’s government as a way to surveil and exert control over teachers and students [27]. On the other hand, Microsoft publicly markets Azure Lighthouse products to organizations to manage, monitor, and control their employees using Microsoft 365 [28]. This is just one example of how institutions can leverage edtech to control teachers’ work.

This type of top-down surveillance and control perpetuates the power imbalance within society. It demonstrates how teachers and their work are dominated by this differential access to the data that they generate. This disparity is further propagated when the data is used in ways that perpetuate societal disparities. To understand power relations, we need to understand the factors that differentiate different groups who hold or are subjugated within these power relations [29]. CALx theorists, like Canagarajah (2020), encourage deeper interrogations of difference than superficial ethno-racial markers, like race [30]. One way to study power relationships is to analyze the various markers that distinguish the dominant and dominated hierarchical classes. Surveillance highlights the power imbalances within our institutions and society, where those in power surveil and control the weak, as in management controlling precariously employed language teachers. I assume that class, in this case, can be demarcated by who has access or control over the surveillance happening, with language teachers and students, for the most part having very little control of how they are being tracked and how that information is being used.

We are surveilled via the data points that are collected about us in digital and physical environments. This data is used to control us and exert power over us. Corporations and governments with privileged access to this data surveil us, further creating additional data points about us, leading to a vicious cycle of control [25]. This cycle can be seen at the micro and macro levels of interaction online. When critiquing power, there is an assumption of hierarchy, where particular groups hold privilege and power over others [16]. For example, teachers monitor student activity and progress on course LMS (learning management systems) and educational apps, institutions monitor teachers to ensure compliance, while the data collected about us by corporations may be sold to governments or used for targeted advertising and social engineering [17, 25, 26]. This surveillance hierarchy demonstrates

how different levels of power allow the control and monitoring of those with less power.

Commercial edtech providers promise that using their platforms allows for the management and monitoring of students and educational quality. This gives “unprecedented agency to platform and software developers and data analysts in the educational process” [31]. At the same time, institutions require teachers to use edtech in their classrooms, and students are expected to participate on these platforms, creating a continuous stream of data collected about us. The data analysts identify performance markers within the interactions on their platforms to enable further surveillance of their users and potential automation points. The continuous supply and processing of data through their platforms is essential for identifying and monitoring these performance markers [31]. The result is a never-ending process of surveillance, deskilling, and automation of teachers’ jobs.

Institutions and the edtech industry continue to push edtech on teachers, giving them little choice or agency in selecting the appropriateness of when and how to use digital tools. Many institutions make decisions about apps, tools, and platforms without teachers’ input. Teachers have little control over what data is collected and how it is used. For example, institutions may require teachers to use a learning management system (LMS), like BrightSpace or Google Classrooms, that collects data about them. At the same time, teachers cannot realistically provide informed and free-willed consent for the type of data being collected about them and how it is used. Using institutionally provided platforms is sometimes seen as part of the job requirement, forcing teachers and students to interact on these platforms, thus allowing the further surveillance and control of teachers [21, 25, 26]. In these relationships, teachers may not know what type of data is collected about them or their students or how their institutions may use it. This disparity in access and knowledge leads to the creation of panopticons that further our oppression. I use LMS in my everyday teaching and I find them invaluable for improving how I organize pedagogical content, communicate, and interact with students. However, I believe that the assumed benefits of an edtech is not an excuse for its uncritical adoption. Drawing parallels from the everyday technology that we use, just as Google maps has proven to be an important staple of everyday travel, we still need to be cognizant of how our geolocation data is being used by Google and the thirds parties that are interested in our data [18].

The success of the gig economy depends on the amount of information collected about the worker. The more data points collected about the worker, the easier it is to manage them and improve performance efficiency [32]. These data points can be fed into algorithms that assist in managing labour. Using the guise of performance management, these systems allow for the control of the workforce using the data points collected through technology [33]. Control of the workforce includes disciplining and ensuring compliance while building evidence to support worker termination, further reinforcing the sense of

replaceability and competition among the workers [33]. This permeates strongly with language teachers who lack job security and agency, where they feel pressured to comply with institutional demands in fear of losing current or future contracts [34].

These surveillance practices affect how teachers perform their work. Webb et al. (2009) discuss how teachers adjust their practice performatively when being monitored [35]. This reduces teacher motivation, creativity, and educational quality. With digital surveillance, the effects might be more profound. In fear of being reprimanded, teachers adjust their practice to fulfill performance metrics that are being monitored, limiting their professional agency and creativity [27]. Even when teachers are not being monitored, they may assume their actions are monitored on institutional LMSs. The panopticon created within LMSs makes users believe their actions are constantly monitored [4]. Within these environments, teachers (and students) adjust their behaviour to comply with the expectations of the institutions. They act performatively within the platform’s limits instead of engaging in authentic teaching and learning exchanges [4]. This exacerbates the lack of trust, rapport, and social connectedness within platform-mediated learning environments [25]. As a result, students receive a much lower quality of education due to the cycle of performative actions exchanged on digital platforms. Arguably, this type of teaching performance reinforces the deskilling and fragmentation of teachers’ work, contributing to their precarity.

4. Deskilling and Automation

Mirrlees and Alvi (2019) provide an overview of the history of Taylorism, a pervasive ideology in management, and its application in edtech [8]. It was conceived as a way to reduce conflicts between workers and employers and increase efficiency. Taylorism involves breaking down work processes into small repetitive steps that could be standardized and transferred, thus allowing managers to train and replace workers easily. This also allowed for the deskilling and automation of work. This can be seen in the education sector today, as teachers’ work is reduced to performance metrics within standardized curricula and practices in the name of efficiency.

Institutional and corporate monitoring of our activities on LMS and edtech creates data points that are used as efficiency markers, allowing the fragmentation of teachers’ roles. Every interaction the teacher makes online can be monitored and reduced to an efficiency marker, such as the average time taken to respond to a student or provide feedback on a student’s work. These data points are not just used for monitoring teachers but also to identify interactions that can be automated or broken away from teachers’ roles in the name of efficiency [25]. The breaking up of teachers’ roles into discrete and measurable actions, or efficiency markers, facilitates the fragmentation of teachers’ roles, responsibilities, and jobs.

Efficiency markers, also called digital performance monitors, are data collected about teachers representing possible interaction points with students in a digital space [25]. This reduces student-teacher relationships to data points, degrading the quality of education and reducing dialogic relationships to clicks. It also degrades teacher agency, who may act performatively in compliance with the perceived expectations of the institution and in isolation from their students.

LMSs play a significant role in increasing labour precarity in the education sector. As it mediates the interactions between teachers and students, it reduces our social connections and relationships. It reduces our interactions to uploaded course content, online assessments, and feedback. For example, teachers who monitor their students via platforms tend “to focus on student data rather than students themselves” [36]. With the lack of social connections, it is easy for institutions to use LMS to increase efficiency by deskilling and automating teachers’ work. This allows institutions to accommodate more students using fewer teachers [37]. At the same time, LMSs are promoted by institutions as tools to improve teacher efficiency and standardize courses by facilitating the efficient recycling of course content. Instead of interacting with students, a teacher’s role is reduced to creating lecture videos devoid of the dialogic relationships formed in classrooms [8]. Consequently, teachers participating in building courses on LMSs are participating in their own deskilling and eventual redundancy via automation. Thus, our compliance with institutional demands and policies perpetuates the disparities experienced by language teachers.

In post-secondary institutions, the data collected about teachers and students has been used to justify funding (or lack thereof) for courses and programs. These decisions are not based on pedagogical justifications but on university performance metrics [25]. Decisions are made about which courses are being supported based on data collected from teachers and students in relation to institutional and policy goals. This affects the degree to which teachers’ jobs are fragmented and automated within educational institutions. Given the marginal status of language teachers and students, it would not be surprising if similar decisions were made within language education.

Neoliberal institutions and ideologies are based on the premise of increasing productivity while reducing costs. These cost reductions usually involve reducing labour costs through the deskilling and automation of work [8]. What was once considered intellectual and white-collar work is being challenged by the advances in algorithms and artificial intelligence used in edtech. For example, automated grading algorithms can be used to replace teachers in assessing student writing on tests and essays. When hosted on LMS, automated grading algorithms allow for the enrollment of a seemingly unlimited number of students simultaneously without the cost of labour and space. This is just one example of how teachers’ roles and jobs are being replaced and automated. The degree to which language teaching roles have been automated de-

pends on the technical capacity of the institution and the degree of division of Labour. Institutions with better access to machines can benefit from the automation of their labourers’ work by reducing costs and increasing productivity [32].

Fragmentation does not just involve the responsibilities within a teacher’s role; it also involves isolating teachers from each other. In the gig economy, workers are constantly reminded that they are replaceable and competing against other [32], consequently, reinforcing their domination and oppression. Language teachers compete with each other for the limited precarious teaching positions available locally and globally. At the same time, gig workers are deliberately isolated and do not know each other [32, 37]. Language teachers working on short-term and part-time contracts also experience this type of isolation. This isolation prevents teachers from forming professional bonds, organizing, or resisting neoliberal forces, degrading their professional identities and agency [37].

5. Hope and Resistance

The desire for a more equitable existence leads to resistance to oppressive forces. It is an ideology, vision, or hope for an alternative reality within the sociopolitical context [16]. The influence of ideology and identity can lead to individual or collective actions towards transformation. Resistance can take various forms, including social movements, alternative cultural expression, and revolts against dominant powers. CALx advocates for transformative practices that address oppression through advocacy, education, and activism [16]. This becomes imperative to protect our livelihoods, professional agency, privacy and civil rights. Thus, this section suggests potential directions for future actions with the hope of better understanding how edtech is affecting language teachers and students.

Canagarajah (1999) explained the perpetuation of oppression in terms of either a reproduction or resistance orientation for the application of CALx in education and applied linguistics. Reproduction orientation is concerned with various ways power is reproduced and reinforced, while a resistance orientation is concerned with the various ways oppression and hegemony are resisted. CALx strives to identify the relations between smaller contextual and larger social structures, bridging our understanding of the relationships between micro- and macrostructures of oppression [38]. To ensure that we do not perpetuate disparities and our domination, language teachers and educators need to find ways to resist their data collection to ensure their data privacy, professional freedom, and the sanctity of student-teacher relationships. By engaging in small acts of resistance, like installing software that prevents data collection, we limit the amount of information we provide to dominating capitalist groups.

The degradation of language teaching jobs through automation and fragmentation affects the nature of our employment, agency, professional identities, and motivation. Despite

research indicating that motivation, engagement, and performance are lower among gig workers [32], neoliberal policies continue to support the degradation of teaching jobs across education. Instead of promoting quality teaching and learning environments, research seems to focus on finding cheap short-term strategies to enhance gig worker efficiency [32]. Institutions and researchers have been pushing teachers to adopt more technology in their practice, while the data being collected via these same platforms is used against teachers. There is a general recognition that the current working conditions for language teachers (at least in Canada) are oppressive due to the lack of stable employment in the field [11-13]. This oppression is recognized in the material conditions of language teachers working precarious jobs. The lack of employment and financial stability also contributes to their professional oppression since they are less likely to resist top-down directives that may not align with their beliefs [34, 39, 40]. Additional scholarship and research are needed to better understand how to protect language teachers' rights, improve working conditions, and professional agency.

Teachers must learn to advocate for themselves in a system that exploits teachers and students by eroding their privacy, relationships, education, and livelihoods. Language teachers already hold marginal spaces in the education sector and are vulnerable to market forces and neoliberal policies. As a result, teachers need to understand how their jobs may be affected by the digitization of their workspaces, not just as consumers of edtech but as workers disenfranchised by it. Teachers need to understand how they are being surveilled and deskilled to find new ways to resist. This includes understanding how data about us is constantly being collected while we are using digital technologies. Understanding our privacy rights and demanding that they be respected in digital spaces is important to protect our well-being, livelihoods, and education systems. Professional associations, unions, advocacy groups, and language teacher education programs need to explore different avenues for empowering teachers to resist and protect their data privacy.

Regan and Jesse (2019) discuss six ethical concerns regarding the collection of our data by edtech. These concerns are "information privacy; anonymity; surveillance; autonomy; non-discrimination; and ownership of information" (p. 170). First, edtech must clarify how much control we have over our private data and how it is shared. Second, they must let users know which data is anonymized and for what purpose. They must also let users know when they are being surveilled and why. Edtech needs to let the user know which data can be tracked or untracked so the user can choose which data is being fed to the AI system. Finally, edtech needs to let users know if any biases or vulnerabilities in the system could disadvantage certain groups. These ethical concerns that need to be raised with edtech corporations and institutions may help us understand the extent to which our data is being exploited [20]. However, our current relationships with edtech prevent any meaningful discussions that would limit teacher

and student exploitation. This is due to the lack of regulations and legislation that could hold edtech accountable for how our data is being collected and used. Currently, there are no checks or balances to protect students' and teachers' privacy on educational or public platforms that could hold companies and institutions accountable for how our data is being used. Collective action is needed to address this by lobbying for improved regulations and legislation that clearly protect the privacy of teachers and students. Collective action may help improve the transparency surrounding how data is collected and used at the institutional level.

On the other hand, teachers tend to dismiss students' right to privacy unless it intersects with their own privacy rights [41]. This differential assessment of privacy rights by teachers allows for the marketing of platforms that provide data analytics to teachers about their students, which simultaneously collects data about the teachers [31, 36]. Unless teachers respect their students' data privacy rights, they will continue to be exploited by institutions and corporations. Understanding our privacy rights will also help us empathize and advocate for students, who are also expected to use the same edtech tools, compromising their data privacy rights [21]. The privacy rights of students and teachers are intertwined. Instead of viewing students' privacy rights as less important than teachers', teachers need to advocate for the equal and fair protection of everyone's rights. The relationships we forge in classrooms and platforms risk being reduced to performative clicks, undermining our agency as teachers and the quality of students' education.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to draw connections between how the violation of data privacy affects language teachers' work. The digitization of language teaching has allowed edtech to collect data about our online interactions without limitations. Unfortunately, due to the lack of transparency around its collection and use, I can not conclusively claim how edtech and our institutions use the data they collect about us. However, the discussions within the broader education sector indicate that there are ethical concerns. Highlighting these concerns using a CALx lens helped foreground the unjust relationships between language teachers, students, institutions, and edtech. The data collected through our digital interactions may be monetized, used in our surveillance and control, and contribute to our deskilling and employment precarity. I highlight these issues as a concerned language teacher, but I hope that scholars with greater knowledge and expertise shed light on how edtech uses our data and its potential impact on our working conditions. In the meantime, we can start by questioning how our institutions and edtech use the data they collect about us.

Abbreviations

CALx	Critical Applied Linguistics
edtech	Educational Technologies
LMS	Learning Management System

Author Contributions

Maryam Elshafei: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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