

INNOVATIVE STUDENT-CENTRED STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EXPERIENCE OF ACTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

To be innovative, the chosen methodological framework in higher education must encompass strategies centred on the student and his professional expectations linked to his training field, with the objective of also working on vital and adequate transversal skills according to the requirements of the labour market and with better results than traditional practices accomplish/have accomplished. A creative, collaborative and interdisciplinary work environment ensures the acquisition of multilingual skills and the development of plurilingual awareness in the digital age.

St-Jean & Dupuis Brouillette (2021) show that, thanks to pedagogical activation, the student effectively engages in his learning, progressing thanks to his ideas and their fulfilment. In project-based learning, the student must invest in developing a project, a dynamic strategy that requires collaborative work, the use of technologies and the creation of artefacts. The teacher's role is to support learning.

The experience presented focuses on the learning of foreign languages through project pedagogy, using digital tools available mainly on android, tablet and computer equipment with undergraduate Media Studies students of the School of Education in Viseu (Portugal), in order that they may acquire skills in French and English for specific purposes. Students work on a project in the two foreign languages using strategies and skills specific to their future professional field. The methodology is presented and discussed, as well as the difficulties encountered and the results obtained, both from the point of view of the student and that of the teacher. Current research results tend to show that the use of active learning methodologies in the context of collaborative work, compared to traditional strategies, can increase student motivation and autonomy. They promote the interactive process among students and between them and the teachers, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and skills as far as foreign languages are concerned. Our objective is to show the path followed by students and teachers, to describe the evolution of learning, with its positive aspects, stumbling blocks and difficulties, and to open up new ways of reflecting on the foreign language teaching/learning process in higher education, based on an experience carried out with students at this particular level. The conclusions taken highlight the need for forthcoming work projects in this area.

Keywords: *Higher education, foreign language for specific purposes, project pedagogy, digital tools, transversal competences.*

1. Introduction

The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HE) has set fundamental standards, clearly stated in *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European HE Area* (2015):

“Standard:—Teaching programmes/projects should not disregard the need for the active involvement of students in the learning process. Also, assessment should be in line with teaching approaches. Guidelines: Student-centered learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. Student-centred learning and teaching - tends to the diversity of students and their needs, allowing for flexible learning paths; - considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate; - flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods; - regularly evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical approaches; - encourages a sense of autonomy on the part of the learner, even though the teacher remains *a guide on the side*. (p. 14)”

In HE, the prevailing classical model of the teacher as *the sage on the stage* has evolved towards a pedagogy centred on the student and on his professional and social environment with a view to adaptation to social changes (Boelen & Chaubet, 2020). The use of digital tools allows the project-based learning (PBL) process to be included in the perspective of the socio-constructivist active methodologies, due to an easier development of transversal skills and the acquisition of student autonomy.

The current project, consisting in the implementation of active learning of foreign languages (FL) in HE, is a follow-up to previous work by the authors, being the corollary of the outcomes of earlier studies,

namely the importance of FL for the labour market (LEE project, Costa Lopes et al., 2018) and experiences of pedagogical innovation, FL and multimodal creativity (JASM project, Delplancq et al., 2021). The methodology implemented in the JASM project (PBL) was also followed in this project experimental design, so as to overcome the lacunae which the said project brought to light.

2. Active learning in HE

The importance of learners' awareness of how to be, teamwork and productive interactions, will hopefully lead to student autonomy and to the ability of evaluating the teaching/learning process in HE from within a learner-based environment and its standpoint. (Bégin-Caouette et al., 2021). The urgent need to provide students with hard and soft skills acknowledges the limitations of traditional teaching patterns, within which the risk of students' artificial understanding is an enduring concern. Such a scenario, in most cases, devalues the investigational dimension, essential in the current academic and professional contexts (Guo et al., 2020). Pedagogical activation requires students' effective commitment to their learning process, assuming their progress can only occur on the basis of their ideas, their proposals and fulfilment, which involves carrying out concrete assignments (St-Jean & Dupuis Brouillette, 2021). Students' benefits are many: greater motivation, better preparation for the labour market with the implementation of learning situations closer to real life, and the creation of a more open work environment (Jung et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2017). To foster proactivity, autonomy and critical thinking, active learning requires the use of active methodologies. Learners acknowledge that they prefer interactive, dynamic classes focused on practice and a prolific exchange between themselves and the teacher (Sousa et al., 2018).

A well-known example of pedagogical activation is PBL, where student involvement is a fact concerning the research they will have to carry out in order to develop a project, conducive to the construction of knowledge and the production of content/subject-matters related to their training field in a real world context (Krajcik & Shin, 2014). These authors point out the learning aims as a guiding issue. The other guiding dimensions in designing the strategies are students' participation in dynamic activities, collaborative work, the use of technologies and the creation of feasible artefacts. The need to be creative leads learners to work in teams, towards a coherent and consistent integration, application and construction of knowledge, with a view to ensuring the success of the project in a closely-knit link with students' training aims and professional demands. The teacher is a learning facilitator, providing support to students.

Besides, in order to be effective, the methodology developed by the teacher should also comprise other features (Fournier-St-Laurent et al., 2019): an appropriate structure for the development of interaction and individual responsibility, digital tools suitable for collaboration, information processing and production, motivating tasks for teamwork and a feedback routine at the different stages of the process. Within this framework, the use of digital tools enables the teacher to prepare motivating tasks to be fulfilled in collaborative assignments inside the classroom. This way, hopefully, students will overcome any reluctance they might have felt when the project they are involved in was first launched. Other key factors for success worth considering are the presentation of a clear rationale and framework for the planned strategies at the beginning of the course, the teacher's interaction with the class, a dynamic management of student interactions, the teacher's support as learning progresses and the clarity and transparency of assessment procedures.

3. The specific case of active learning using digital tools in FL teaching in HE

In HE training courses other than those in the field of a FL or languages, the concern with student motivation and the incentive to work with FL according to labour market needs, among other aspects, demand an increased effort on the part of teachers, involving a process of permanent reflection on their practices, their standpoint and consequent updating. Digital tools should allow for the redesign of learning processes (Habowski et al., 2019). The rational use of social media in FL learning in HE is definitely considered to be a powerful aid for the ease of access and the motivation and attention it induces in students, digital natives of the 21st century. The notion of space and time and the teacher-student relationship have been revolutionised to consolidate and regulate learning (Oliveira et al., 2020). A study by Saqr, Fors and Nouri (2018) highlights a positive correlation between student performance, classroom interaction and student-centred methodology due to the use of social media in HE.

One has developed a pedagogical approach relying on the use of social media which has received a positive response from both students and teachers. Nevertheless, the approach was implemented with caution; this methodology requires further studies and analysis so that its real impact can be understood, (Pickhart & Botezat 2021). Several authors also insist on the teacher's role at a time where the challenges of the digital world are increasingly evident and should be seen as assets for students' benefit. Student participation and interest in training and the level and quality of teaching are clearly improved by the use

of social media as part of the collaborative learning of FL skills (Eghtesad, 2020). Facebook and Instagram are social networks regularly cited in the literature concerning this field. However, the success of FL learning in this framework is not inseparable from the underlying methodology (Delplancq et al., 2019). Our concern also lies in controlling the perverse effects of the use of digital tools in the classroom, such as the lack of interest of some students, the difficulty of others in distinguishing fun from work, etc.

The PBL experience divulged in this article was implemented in the 2021-22 academic year and deals with a group of HE students in Portugal involved in the learning of French and English as FL. It presents the chosen work methodology, introducing social networks as agents of motivation, sharing and creativity, describes the working strategies developed and discusses the outcomes in the context of previous studies.

4. Active FL learning experience in HE in Portugal

4.1. Experimental group and framework

The 24 students included in this experiment attended the FL option *FL applied to the new media and cyberspace*, in the 2nd year of the undergraduate Media Studies course in ESEV during the 2nd semester of the 2021-22 academic year. This course intends to train media professionals (journalism, audio-visual production and direction and communication consultancy and develops research in these areas).

The chosen work methodology is in line with a PBL perspective, relying also on digital tools in a collaborative environment likely to promote autonomy as far as tasks preparation and completion are concerned. Moreover, it aims to deepen previously acquired knowledge in FL and the ongoing work on FL skills through activities conceived within the framework of projects to be developed during the whole semester, requiring not only that students resort to FL skills, but also to transversal and interdisciplinary competences, fundamental for students' forthcoming professional life and conforming to the profile of those soon to work in the Media Studies field. Students chose the themes for the projects freely, but with the requirement that they disclose the reality which permeates society and are feasible in terms of the collection of diversified and sufficient material to work regularly throughout the semester. They should also enable, as a result, presentations in the classroom and original and creative publications.

4.2. Methodology

The teachers presented the work proposal to the students in the 1st session of the semester: methodology, the learning strategies, the theoretical framework, the reasons for the adopted approach, the stages of development of the project on the evaluation phases (of the project, of the students by the teachers, of the students among themselves, of self-evaluation and of the teachers by the students), the expectations and expected outcomes, and the dissemination of this work. All the students agreed and were enthusiastic. The teachers also presented a negotiable proposal for evaluation throughout the semester, undergoing the principle of continuous evaluation, with regular delivery of work on the *Moodle* platform and a grade concerning participation and publications in terms of originality, quality and creativity. Students also agreed with this proposal. Then, a class representative was elected. The students formed groups, without any particular instructions on the part of the teachers inasmuch as to whether mixed ability language level groups should or should not be favoured over others, apart from other possible constraints. Eight groups comprising three students were created. Each group had to choose a spokesperson. The students had one week to decide which social network(s) they wanted to favour for sharing their work and the name(s) they had chosen for their account(s). They also had to determine the theme of the project and develop a work plan.

The assessment of the FL level was left for the 2nd session. It included the four usual written and oral skills of comprehension and expression, based on original tests designed according to the principles of the CEFR and inspired by the DELF, DALF and TOEFL tests. Each block of skills had a controlled answer time. The average English language level concerning the four skills was between B1 and B2; in terms of French, it was B1 for comprehension and A2 for expression. Throughout this same session, groups were also required to present their projects to the class, in the two FL. Improvements were introduced based on the interaction with teachers and colleagues. The work plans were revised and delivered on the *Moodle* platform, so that all registered students could consult them. A *Facebook* group was created for the whole class, ensuring that the demands of confidentiality were met and maintained, alongside with the request for institutional authorizations and information sent to friends, inviting them to follow the publications. Some groups realised the importance of going ahead with *Instagram* accounts as well. Requests were drafted for the interviewees to capture images and publish them on the social networks. In a first stage, the students researched the proposed themes, likely to enable them to acquire more knowledge conducive to a more consistent reflection. Then, the students began the contacts for the interviews that could be done face to face or remotely (mail, telephone, *Zoom*), under the assumption an image file would be available. The

teachers supervised the preparation of the list of entities to be contacted and the drafting of the requests, as well as all the interview scripts.

In the middle of the semester, the project team's expert in photography and digital art led a 90-minute session on the topic of *Documentary Recording*. He stressed the relevance of creativity as one of the fundamental abilities to leave one's unique imprint in the labour market, and underlined the fact that the specialised skills for the future profession should come alongside with other skills, namely concerning the handling of digital tools, for a relevant documentary photography. The students assessed this session as very positive, as it enabled them to have a new perspective on the project productions. This was the moment for students and teachers to reflect on the work developed so far and on the difficulties encountered when it came to the implementation of required improvements. Teachers' help in the reorientation of some projects was required and also encouraged more creativity on the part of students.

The groups carried out the capture of images and interviews throughout the semester. All texts and posts for social networks were presented by students to the class, after being corrected by the teachers. This allowed for language competences to be improved, which required collaborative work, together with the acquisition of autonomy in the conclusion of the tasks, with corresponding flexibility and rapid adaptation to the situation. The weekly self- and peer-evaluation work (students and teachers) guaranteed the learning path logic, confirming that all students felt comfortable with the project, while allowing for a better identification with the tasks on their part, the creation of a working environment favourable to the integration of all students in this new learning approach, a constant repositioning inasmuch as quality is concerned, and a reflection on the creativity and impact of the productions in FL. In order to promote the creative spirit, teachers fostered the use of online design platforms to diversify the images linked to the publications. Over time, students' productions evolved in terms of language level, diversity of text nature (theoretical and opinion articles, reports, interviews, ...) and creativity and a renewed enthusiasm in the publications. Students changed from simple editing of images with captions to proposing more elaborate and attractive posts. The work they delivered for assessment purposes confirmed this evolution.

At the end of the semester a final qualitative evaluation was carried out. Each group had to present and justify in both FL, in writing and orally, the whole route taken and synthesize the publications. This qualitative evaluation also formalised their self-evaluation regarding the project work and the improvement of FL skills and of transversal and complementary competences. The class was then engaged in the hetero evaluation both of colleagues and teachers and in the evaluation of the developed methodology. The quantitative assessment of the FL level evolution took place on the basis of the assessment of the works presented, published and delivered on the *Moodle* platform.

5. Discussion and conclusion

PBL is undoubtedly a motivating methodology for the students involved. Together with digital tools, it enables the development of FL skills in HE, while also helping promote key transversal competences required by the labour market. The whole process demands a strict organization from the beginning and the establishment of a culture of sharing, self-assessment and constructive criticism. It also presupposes the acquisition of a form of autonomy which is vital for the successful conclusion of the tasks. The *Moodle* platform proved to be a vital tool for sharing information and work, prior to its dissemination.

As far as the CU quantitative results are concerned, it became clear that all students' FL level increased by one degree, both in writing and orally. Regarding the monitoring of the activities and the qualitative assessment (carried out through conversations based on questions and free comments) throughout and at the end of the semester, it can be stated that students enjoyed the freedom of choosing the theme of the project and of designing the course. They acknowledged having acquired autonomy and feeling more comfortable with communicating in FL. The session on photography was seen as beneficial and the follow-up suggestions, reorientation and corrections by the teachers were regarded as very useful. They admitted, however, that they found it difficult to take advantage of all the benefits of autonomy, even when considering the collaborative nature of the work, due to a lack of innovative ideas and creativity in the various stages of the process. Students spontaneously confessed that they would have preferred to conform to more familiar tasks in the use or research of new digital tools to make the final result more attractive.

The role of the teaching staff is clearly to supervise the course chosen, which requires that they master new strategies, an excellent knowledge of the nature of the course in question and its features, flexibility, immediate adaptability, increased availability even outside the classroom, help with guidance when a problem arises and the capacity to offer different types of support even beyond the scope of the FL. No matter how paradoxical it might seem, the fact is that such support is clearly more demanding and requires a lot more work and rigour than the preparation of classes where the teacher adopts a traditional methodology. However, it is also much more rewarding regarding the learning environment inside and outside the classroom. The preparation of each session must follow strict criteria as far as work rhythm, timetable and evaluation are concerned. Teachers had to get better acquainted with digital tools, immediately identifying the ones easily manageable in the school context. They basically relied on the

smartphone and a sporadic use of the computer. In order to foster more creativity, they gave examples of good practices.

It is advisable that this experiment is repeated using other digital tools, accessible through smartphone applications. It would be stimulating to complete the research team with a specialist in digital communication who could also help boost students and teachers' creativity.

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