THE EVOLUTION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A RISKY APPROACH

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Abstract

The introduction of active pedagogies into teaching practices is creating renewed motivation and energy for teachers and students alike. These varied pedagogies, marked by a few trends, represent, particularly in higher education (HE), a tremendous opportunity to modernise content and make the learning environment livelier and more open. However, it should be acknowledged that many difficulties have arisen, and many challenges need to be overcome. It is not only a question of selecting suitable active teaching methods, but it is also vital to define strategies that are appropriate to the target audience, the time available, and the skills being pursued to be flexible and responsive enough to reorient learners very quickly, even during class time, and to create activities that are motivating and effective in terms of learning. The impact on assessment is evident. Digital tools play a major role in this new paradigm, but they can also lead to problems in the students' work if they do not identify with the target digital tools. Learning foreign languages (FL) is becoming more communicative and interactive. In this sense, online platforms, mobile applications, and multimedia resources offer tremendous opportunities to develop multiple skills and diversify knowledge influenced by social and professional demands. This research shows the results of studies carried out in recent years with students of the Media Studies degree at the Higher School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (Portugal) in FL courses. We will introduce the active teaching methods used, discuss the pedagogical devices, lesson plans and choices made regarding the digital tools used, and list the difficulties encountered by the teachers and the major challenges they had to tackle in order to guarantee and maintain the students' motivation and commitment throughout the course. Keeping these ideas in mind, the assessment of skills and knowledge also needs to evolve to better guarantee the fulfilment of the learning objectives. In conclusion, the risks created by this deep and extremely rapid evolution are inherent to the extraordinary opportunities to rethink FL learning and test new activities characterised by promoting creativity at the HE level. The key factor lies in the adaptability of all the participants involved in the process, the willingness to move ahead, away from the comfort zone of traditional approaches and to innovate in a reasonable and effective way.

Keywords: *Active pedagogies, foreign languages, higher education, challenges, opportunities.*

1. Introduction

Applying pedagogical activation strategies wisely and setting up motivating and practical activities in the teaching-learning of foreign languages (FL) with specific objectives in higher education (HE) is not an obvious or simple task for the various actors in the process. Concentrating on the student, his/her characteristics, motivations, interests, and the specific institutional and professional aspects of the course, the teacher needs to possess knowledge about various parameters and management tools that are not always easy to apply. The teacher's role in this new paradigm of learning has evolved enormously, and the difficulties he or she must face to carry out his or her mission successfully are manifold (Børte, Nesje, & Lillejord, 2020).

Understanding the different variables, knowing how to take advantage of them and interconnecting them in a way that is effective both for the learning environment and for the objectives pursued in terms of developing skills and acquiring knowledge is often a real obstacle for the FL teacher. Digital tools help to introduce dynamic activities as part of active teaching strategies, but they are not always a guarantee of success - quite the contrary. Poorly chosen, poorly supervised and poorly used, they can represent a drop in

motivation, a risk for the fulfilment of the objectives envisaged in terms of learning and a lack of interest on the part of learners (Delplancq, Costa, Pereira, Gillain, & Fidalgo, 2024).

Several experiments have been carried out in recent years at the Higher School of Education (ESEV) of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (Portugal) in FL classes (English and French) with students from various non-language-oriented degrees. All these projects aim to renew learning practices to better motivate learners, update approaches and activities with current digital methods and tools and meet the demands of the 21st century in societal and professional terms. Many observations were made, leading to improvements in the teaching methods used and the identification of weaknesses in their implementation, particularly in interaction throughout the learning process and assessment.

After a brief description of the experimental route and context, the article looks into the work of the teachers at various stages of the learning process: choice and introduction of active teaching methods, development of preferred strategies, design and proposal of activities specific to the target groups, options for digital tools and development and application of the assessment model defined jointly with the learners. It highlights the benefits of the choices made, their weaknesses, the challenges met, and the difficulties encountered in preparing and implementing the experimental system.

2. Background to the implementation of active teaching methods

The ongoing implementation of active pedagogies at ESEV began at the start of the 2018-19 academic year, a need accelerated by the global health crisis. Undergraduate courses last three years. The first experiments involved students attending the undergraduate Media Studies course (2nd year). The study plan of this course comprises three years (180 ECTS), which includes one compulsory FL curricular unit (English and French; 4 ECTS each) and three which are optional (4 ECTS). The study plan of the said course also includes curricular units within the fields of photography, digital art, or technologies. This course intends to train media professionals (journalism, audio-visual production and direction and communication consultancy and develops research in these areas). The average number of learners in the experimental group was 20. The rooms available have only a desk computer and a projector. Wi-Fi is available throughout the school.

The work was refined and then extended to other professional degree courses, such as Advertising and Public Relations or Sport and Physical Activity taught at the same institution, with the same FL teachers.

The findings of an initial project (Lopes et al., 2018) reinforced the conviction that FLs were vital for the labour market, both at the time of recruitment and during integration and career progression. The benefits are clear for both employees and companies. For teachers, this implies an ever-closer approximation to the realities of the labour market and society in general in the form of lively and motivating learning with up-to-date teaching methods, strategies, activities, tasks and tools. The first thing to consider is which teaching methods best suit the learning conditions and target audiences.

First step: choosing active teaching methods

The first question which arises when considering the choice of active teaching methods is the target audience's specific characteristics. The generational, cognitive, and socio-economic characteristics of the target audience, their educational background, professional experience, level of knowledge in the subject in question, and cross-disciplinary skills need to be described. The face-to-face learning environment must be assessed. Students should also be allowed to reorientate their choices throughout the course to make learning more responsible and motivating. Lastly, the teaching methods adopted should enable the development of the intended skills and the acquisition of knowledge, which should be monitored and assessed in a coherent manner (Harrington et al., 2021).

Collaborative and cooperative work in small, linguistically heterogeneous groups in rooms that were large enough and flexible enough to accommodate it was immediately valued. Given the needs of the students and the academic profile of HE, project-based learning and research were also essential. Flipped classroom strategies were used to leave room for the development of communication in all its forms. The work was carried out in M-learning using the usual mobile electronic devices: mobile phones, tablets and notebooks. Brainstorming sessions, debates, and discussions shared during the classes based on the work carried out within the projects were chosen to strengthen the interaction between the various actors in the process and encourage spontaneous discourse.

Peer assessment has emerged as an important step in highlighting the relationship between the strategies adopted and assessment and valuing the student as an active partner in learning. Finally, the use of electronic platforms and gamification are currently active teaching methods that are virtually indispensable in the process of revitalising and modernising learning practices.

Digital tools are a powerful ally of active teaching methods. But they still need to be chosen and mastered.

Second step: choosing digital tools

The Internet offers us a vast choice of digital tools, some of which are quite similar and some of which are more or less user-friendly, secure and natural. Constantly evolving, not least because of the growing influence of ever more powerful AI, these tools can quickly become paying tools, in whole or in part, for a more sophisticated version whose benefits in terms of functionality are not necessarily vital to the objectives pursued in the classroom. The other criteria used to select these tools are the originality of the productions and their compatibility with the level of learning, ease of access and use (for both teachers and students), the size of the mobile application, the functionality modules and the packs of elements. Safety conditions must also be taken into account during installation and use.

Digital tools whose primary objective is not learning can be useful for implementing activities and updating presentations. For example, the Korsakow system6 is a documentary and narrative production software that enables teachers and students to present the results of their research and project work in a dynamic and engaging way (Lopes et al., 2023). Social networks also play a significant role in the publication of products produced by students in collaborative and cooperative terms (Delplancq, Costa Lopes, Pereira, & Fidalgo, 2023).

The Moodle platform enables remote contact to be maintained with students, including those who cannot attend classes regularly. It can also be used to share documents or information, for archiving, to record assignments, etc. Real-time collaboration in the preparation of documents from multiple devices has been put in place thanks to Google Docs.

Canva, Gamma-app and Animaker can create dynamic presentations, tag clouds, mood boards and mind maps. Genially helps you create original interactive tools like computer graphics and escape games. Adobe Photoshop retouches, processes and customises images for original creations. Google Maps Street View is a geoportal that brings a wealth of resources to FL learning through its encounters with external reality and the originality of the resulting activities (for example, preparing a guided tour for a specific audience in a given time). Immersive experiences, such as virtual visits to remarkable sites, with exploitation activities at the end, are other pathways that have been explored. Questions were put to ChatGPT in order to enrich the proposed answers.

In terms of assessment, the students chose Kahoot or Quizizz to assess their colleagues at the end of the activities through fun quiz-type activities. The learners also used Mentimeter for evaluation in the form of surveys. Puzzel.org and Wordize were used to create word games to reinforce and evaluate what had been learnt.

Many other platforms, such as those for generating texts or answers to specific questions were tested but were ultimately not chosen in line with the reasons given above, following dialogue with the students to elicit feedback throughout the development of the work plan.

Third step: defining and implementing the work plan with the students

The key concepts in defining the work plan are differentiated and diversified learning, equity, efficiency, individualisation, personalisation, collaboration, active and innovative student-centred methodologies, creativity, hard and soft skills acquisition, and multidisciplinarity. The work plan is systematically presented to the students at the beginning of the semester, justified and negotiated with them to encourage enthusiasm, awakening motivation and calling on everyone to take responsibility as dynamic actors. Adaptability and flexibility are seen as essential characteristics of the work plan.

The first stage, therefore, consists of a conversation with the learners focusing on their expectations regarding FL learning, their opinions on motivating and empowering them with the FL skills likely to assist (and be an asset for) them in their forthcoming jobs, their desire to work with digital tools and their knowledge of the subject. This icebreaker phase is essential if students are to identify with the process, feel that they are working as a team and appreciate the importance of FL learning at this level of education. Working together to define KPIs is another vital initial activity in this consensual and responsible pathway approach. Finally, the students must also specify all the skills to be developed. The groups are created and each elects a spokesperson to gather the team's opinions and proposals.

The teaching unit must be presented in detail (objectives, methodologies, strategies, content, etc.) and with complete transparency, especially about the proposed assessment model, which all must adopt. The continuous assessment parameter must be valued in this context of accountability for learning and its results. Group and individual assessment elements must be consistent with and linked to the methods adopted. Self-assessment and peer assessment are introduced. Language levels (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) must be assessed at the beginning and end of the course, and this has been done using original tests developed by the teachers based on TOEFL, DALF and DELF. The

results are presented to and discussed with the students and should serve as a guide for the proposed activities.

The following sessions use active teaching strategies continuously, sometimes intersecting but alternating to avoid monotony and encourage renewed creativity. The activities are diversified for the same reasons. They consist of tasks that mobilise cross-disciplinary skills specific to the students' subjects (e.g. reports and interviews for the media studies degree, virtual guided tours for those in advertising and public relations, training plans for those in sport, escape room, quizzes, word games, etc.).

Monitoring is one of the keys to success. Regular updates and sharing of difficulties, successes, doubts, and improvements to be made to the various components of the process (including the games created, from the point of view of the teachers and students) are important assets in collaborative learning. Learners need to feel supported, learn to adopt positive attitudes and be able to obtain clear answers to their proposals and doubts. The SWOT analysis format is an interesting one to use in this approach. The evolution of KPIs should also be assessed, and a comparative analysis of student learning results will help with reflection and improvement.

3. Discussion

In the case of the experiments carried out with vocational bachelor degree students at ESEV, the implementation of active teaching methods, in particular, assisted by digital tools, has very clearly led to a renewal of practices and a repositioning of the roles of both teachers and students. The appropriateness of learning and the entire teaching-learning process are being questioned. Teachers are working on new strategies, but students are also developing new techniques to make their work easier, such as installing automatic translation functions on electronic devices.

Regarding preparation, the teachers have had to take various spontaneous training courses, mainly distance learning (MOOCs, tutorials, etc.), on active teaching methods, digital tools, using and applying digital platforms, etc. The aforementioned investment in time becomes even more time-consuming due to the preparation of activities specific to the target audience and the creation of material, particularly online material. Supporting work outside contact hours also means being more available and having flexible working hours.

A precise analysis of the workspace, the materials available, the characteristics of the target audience in terms of generational interests, knowledge, academic and professional expectations, the time available in and out of the classroom, and the skills to be developed is essential before embarking on the design of the teaching system. The work plan is open-ended and must ensure the student's active participation in the various stages, including their own decisions on how the work plan unfolds. The teachers present work proposals, accounting for each of the components therein included. As the students must give their opinions and interact to complete and improve the proposed plan, they very quickly feel like they are part of a team guided by the teachers. Flexibility does not mean losing sight of the objectives of the curriculum unit.

Flipped classroom strategies were used to enable learners to continue learning outside the classroom and to prepare material for face-to-face lessons, mainly focused on developing communication in all its forms. Peer evaluation helped to strengthen critical thinking and to highlight the relationship between the strategies adopted and the evaluation. Experiments in self-evaluation and hetero evaluation with a view to constructive criticism need to be worked on with the class to learn to develop positive attitudes and effective, objective and ethical communication.

Introducing active teaching strategies, particularly playful activities, means not losing sight of the teaching objectives and avoiding falling into the trap of the wow effect. These strategies also imply regularly reminding students of the rules, varying the strategies, activities and materials used and produced, and monitoring them regularly. Gamification is a great success, but it also requires reflexive thought, work and monitoring. In this context, particular attention must be paid to the assessment model. Discussed and negotiated with the students, their assessment must also be flexible enough to adapt to changes, student activities and their relevant suggestions.

4. Conclusion

Active teaching strategies aided by digital tools play a significant role in motivating teachers and students when applied in a reasoned and highly monitored way. The most significant benefit is to better address the identified needs of students, who feel more motivated and more committed to the process of sharing the responsibilities and expectations of the various actors involved. Every effort must be made to ensure that all learners, without exception, feel at ease with these teaching methods and derive maximum benefit from them in terms of varied and up-to-date learning without falling into the trap of over-facilitating.

The activities devised must be creative, original, varied, consistent with the objectives, and arouse the interest of the learners while guaranteeing the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge. The investment in time and energy for teachers is considerable, as they are in a process where relationships with learners are very different from those of traditional models, and timetables are flexible.

Among the obstacles that need to be overcome, the extreme variability and rapid evolution of digital tools require constant attention. Assessing the effectiveness of learning in terms of knowledge acquired and skills developed is a real challenge. One of the problems is understanding whether these gains are sustainable. In addition to these aspects, future research needs to assess the acceptance, functionality, and usability of the technologies used by teachers and students and the real impact of digital tools.

Acknowledgement

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