



# The E-Learning Model of a Language Centre in Pandemic Times

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## Abstract

*The World Health Organization (WHO) declared, in March 2020, the situation caused by the covid-19 virus as a pandemic. The organization and functioning of the Language Centre, as other educational Centres and institutions, had to adapt its activity from a model completely presential to a model completely online. Despite the initial panic among the trainers at the Language Centre, this process had to be swift, required online training for trainers to develop an online training model suitable for teaching Portuguese or foreign languages and involved adapting the educational relationship between trainees and trainers to the virtual world. It was a real challenge. In this perspective, this text addresses the process that a Language Centre of a polytechnic institute in Portugal developed to react to the adversities it had to face in the context of the pandemic situation that took place to date. To assess the results of this process of (in)formation, initial follow-up, technical support and corresponding experience in an educational context, a survey was carried out by questionnaire to the Language Centre trainers. After evaluating the personal knowledge of each trainer, some main problems were detected: how to operate with platforms such as colibri zoom, which until then were unknown; how to adapt teaching and interaction processes in the classroom to the distance mode; how and which tools can support distance teaching and learning processes, etc. In short, in addition to specifying the relevant aspects of the methodologies of online training sessions and the pedagogical use of digital technologies, this text discuss the main considerations and results of the questionnaire and interviews.*

**Keywords:** Language Centre; SARS COV2; online language learning

## 1. Introduction

At the end of March 2020, the exponential worldwide advancement of the disease caused by the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus led to the declaration of a new pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Organizations, in general, and educational institutions, in particular, had to adapt their organization and functioning to this new reality. The Language Centre was no exception and had to move from a plan completely dependent on the face-to-face model to a completely online model.

The trainers and trainees of the Language Centre had to reinvent themselves and had to bet on an online training model suited to the process of teaching and learning Portuguese or foreign languages, overcoming the constraints that these times have caused. To this end, three main training sessions were provided: i) Colibri Zoom Videoconference: first steps; ii) Methodologies for online training sessions and associated technologies; iii) Tools to create online activities and quizzes.

This paper reports a case study that correspond to the challenge undertaken by the Language Centre of a polytechnic institute in Portugal, in the academic year 2020/2021, with a view to reacting to the adversities it had to face during the pandemic situation that took place this last school year.

In this sense, to understand the effects of both the training process for trainers that was carried out, and the initial follow-up and particular technical support, a questionnaire survey and interviews were carried out with the 5 trainers of this Language Centre, in July 2021, with a view to evaluate the impact of this initiative in the educational context of this training Centre.

In this paper, we present a reflection on the main results and problems identified, essentially related to the platforms and technologies to be used, with the strategy of adequacy of teaching and interaction processes for the distance mode and with technological aspects related to the tools that could support the processes of teaching and learning at a distance, etc.

## 2. Methodology

As previously mentioned, methodologically, this work corresponds to a case study. A case can be an individual, a group or an organization, but it can also be something more abstract such as decisions, programs, implementation processes or organizational changes [1], [2], [3]. As empirical research, a



case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined [2]. We can assume that this case study corresponds to an exploratory study, since its main purpose is to define the questions or hypotheses for possible further research.

A case study allows you to obtain information from multiple data sources. The main information collection instruments used were the questionnaire, individual and group interviews, and other records that information and communication technologies allowed us to obtain during the training sessions.

## **1.2 Participants**

In terms of the characterization of the five trainers' participants in this case study, we can mention that of the five trainers at the Language Centre, only one is male (20%), all have a degree (80%) and one of them has a master's degree (20%); two trainers teach English and Portuguese to foreigners, the rest: one teaches French, another one teaches German and the other teaches English.

## **1.3 Instruments and procedure**

The instruments used were the survey by a questionnaire [4], individual and group interviews, and other information collected by the platforms used during the training sessions.

First, through the Google questionnaire [4], the perception of the knowledge, attitudes and personal and professional skills of each trainer was collected and analyzed. Individual interviews to all the five trainers were complemented with a focus group organized by the Language Centre management.

The questions that we present below used a response scale of six options: 0 (Very bad or never used), 1 (Bad), 2 (Insufficient); 3 (Enough), 4 (Good) and 5 (Very Good), or 1 (Never), 2 (Few), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), 5 (Quite often) and 6 (Always).

## **3. Analysis and presentation of results**

Before the pandemic, three trainers considered their level of use of information and communication technologies to be sufficient, while two of them considered it to be good. As for their level of use of applications to create murals (padlet, etc), only one considered it to be good, two considered it sufficient and the rest insufficient. The level of use of videoconferencing systems (Zoom, Skype or others) and the level of use of e-learning systems (Moodle, Sakai (IPBvirtual), Google Classroom or MS Teams, etc) was good for two trainers, but mainly outside the training context. The level of use of game-based evaluation platforms (Kahoot!, Socrative or Quizizz, etc), the level of use of screen recording platforms (screencast-o-matic, LOOM and similar) and the level of use of other applications specific educational or other generic educational applications was sufficient for two of them and for the rest it was even at lower levels.

During the pandemic and after training, the level of use of information and communication technologies, the level of use of applications to create murals (padlet, etc), the level of use of videoconferencing systems (Zoom or others), the level of use of e-learning platforms or systems (Moodle, Sakai (IPBvirtual), Google Classroom or MS Teams, etc.), the level of use of game-based assessment platforms (Kahoot!, Socrative or Quizizz, etc), the level of use of screen recording platforms (screencast-o-matic, LOOM and similar), the level of use of other specific educational applications and the level of use of generic educational applications rose a point or even two in the response options of all questions or issues when compared to the same issues before the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, it was asked what level of use of pedagogical methodologies in the training actions the trainer taught. Most admit that her classes were frequently expository: often (1 trainer) and very often (2 trainers). But it appears that these values increased even more during the pandemic. During the interviews and the focus group it became noticeable that the lack of confidence in the use of active methodologies through the online model and the lack of time flexibility in the training process to implement other digital strategies and technologies could be at the heart of the excess of expository classes. Most do not recognized changes regarding lectures integrated with exercises and/or individual and group activities. The flipped classroom (the student consulted the contents autonomously at home and clarified doubts about them later in the class [5]) was used more often by three trainers. In terms of project-based learning, only one of the trainers admits that there has been an increase in the use of this methodological strategy. As for problem-based learning (a teaching style that pushes students to become the drivers of their learning education, using complex, real-world issues as the classroom's subject matter, encouraging students to develop problem-solving skills and learn concepts instead of just absorbing facts [6]), no significant improvement was noted. Question-



based learning (a type of inquiry where the learner is guided by forming and refining a guiding question) was admitted for improvement by two trainers. However, individual interviews were enlightening by identifying moments of use of active methodologies superior to those identified in the questionnaire.

Before the pandemic, the level of use of digital tools or technologies in the training actions was as follows: Educast for publishing video classes had never been used. The Colibri / Zoom was never used by 4 of the 5 trainers; Skype, Messenger, Google Meet and YouTube, Google Tools (Google Docs, Forms), Padlet and similar and Microsoft Office 365 Tools (Word online, Excel online, Teams) were used a few times by three, while social networks (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc) were used quite often by three, despite the fact that in the interviews they were used essentially at the level of personal interaction for possible brief clarifications. Platforms such as IPB-virtual (Sakai), Moodle or others were rarely used (2 trainers) or sometimes used (2 trainers). Obviously, e-mail before and during the pandemic continued to be the most used service.

During the pandemic and after the training, we can mention that there was a considerable increase in the values referred to many times or always. It should be noted that the Colibri / Zoom videoconference is now always used by all trainers.

Although the trainers mentioned that the level of use of screen recording platforms (screencast-o-matic, LOOM and similar) has increased, it was not possible to conclude this reality by observing the platforms used to distribute content to the trainees.

During the pandemic, most respondents report that the use of digital tools in the training actions they taught contributed to improve learning, contributed to improve teaching, contributed to improve communication between them and their trainees, contributed to improve communication between the trainees, contributed to better manage time and activities.

Also during the pandemic, the level of use of the assessment alternatives that stood out was online tests with supervision and oral exams by videoconference, although there was an attempt to adopt more projects and practical work presented online.

Finally, it is important to mention two of the most representative comments:

Comment 1: *During the pandemic, the new methodologies helped me a lot! I myself did not use technological means very often, but during the last semesters these resources improved not only my teaching method, but also the interest and performance of the students.*

Comment 2: *The experience was quite satisfactory and, in my view, the new technologies only came to complement and favor on-site teaching in the classroom. More formations of this kind are welcome! Thank you very much, profesor...*

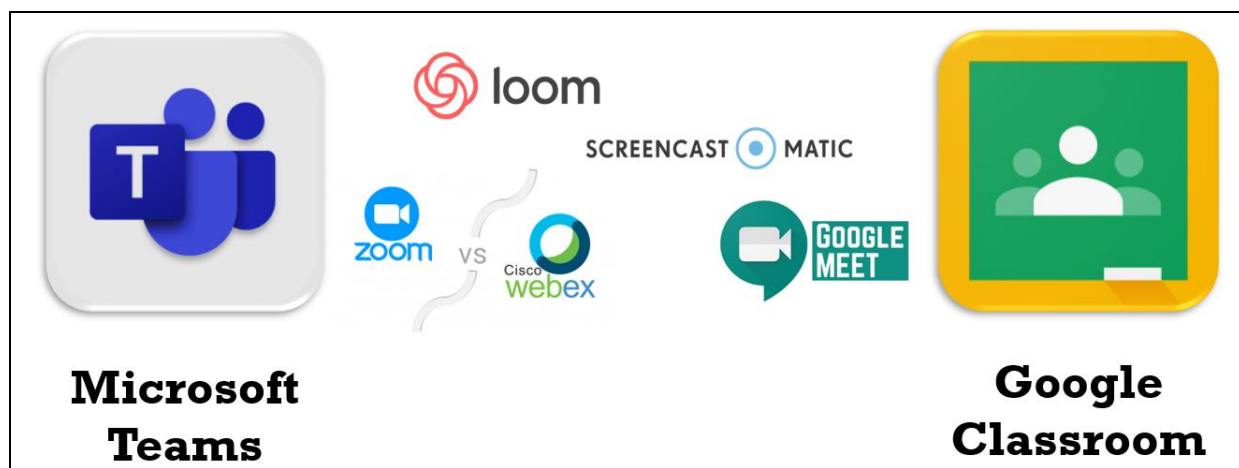


Fig. 1 – Technologies to face pandemic times

#### 4. Final considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to change our way of being, communicating and learning. From the face-to-face classroom, teachers and students had to move to the virtual classroom. Despite the constraints, society found ways to reinvent itself, using digital multimedia communication networks.



In this case study, we try to understand how this whole process occurred within the Language Centre of a Polytechnic Institute in northern Portugal. The trainers and trainees at this centre had to bet on an online training model and overcome the constraints that these times have caused, through the use of active methodologies and digital technologies.

To this end, through a survey by questionnaire, the perception of the personal and professional knowledge of each trainer was acquired, as well as some of the main problems: how to operate with platforms, such as Colibri / Zoom, which until then were unknown, how to adapt teaching and learning processes for a distance model, how and which tools can support distance teaching and learning processes, etc. In addition to specifying the relevant aspects of the methodologies of online training sessions and the pedagogical use of digital technologies, this text discussed the main considerations and results of the questionnaire survey. These data were supplemented with individual and group interviews. Although the overly expository class by Colibri / Zoom videoconference still represents high values, an evolution is highlighted by privileging the use of new active methodologies and associated technologies, such as: inverted class, gamification, project-based learning and problem-based learning or in question-based learning. However, we can say, during the pandemic and after the training modules, the answer choices for all questions or problems increased by a point or even two compared to the same problems before the pandemic, but in some technologies or tools this was not so significant, as we observed in the interviews and observing the use of the tools and platforms.

The battle between humanity and the coronavirus has digital technology allies that the Spanish flu did not have. We hope that the apparent evolution towards knowledge and skills in the use of digital technologies can be a positive aspect driven by this pandemic.

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