



Learning Languages behind the Screens: Motivation and Formative Assessment

Elena Martí Alonso¹

American School of Valencia, Spain¹

Abstract

Language teachers face increasingly diversified groups of students in terms of skills, interests, cultural backgrounds and experience in learning languages. The challenge to adapt the lessons to these diverse groups of students got bigger when we were forced to stay behind the screens of our devices, due to Covid 19. Adaptability and collaboration are becoming the words that best describe our new reality. We need to be ready for changes and also our lessons need to fix whatever new situation that may appear. In addition, we need to keep students engaged and motivated from the isolation of their rooms. More than ever, it's important to connect students to real life, giving them choices and opportunities to show their thinking, their understanding and their progress. They seem to wake up when we allow them to discover, connect with their previous knowledge and reflect on a large variety of topics from a wide cultural context, when they choose topics for research and ways of showing progress. It seems essential to find the way to engage the students by awakening curiosity, developing reflection and by encouraging independence as learners. Therefore, it may be a good opportunity to focus on formative assessment rather than on test scores to ensure real learning in this virtual environment that has suddenly taken over.

Sure enough, the use of technology allows infinite possibilities of research and creativity, although we are still not able to bring the direct and dynamic interaction of the classrooms to the screens. The educational revolution that is taking place nowadays will probably bring in the near future another concept of school capable of adapting to sudden and constant changes without forgetting, hopefully, that emotions are fundamental in the learning process.

Keywords: *Motivation, formative assessment, collaboration, online interaction.*

1. Introduction

The new situation in which we are living due to Covid 19, has taught several lessons to all of us, but essentially we learnt that the only way to survive is through collaboration. There is no way we can get out of this alone, as a country, as a community or as an individual, because we are all interconnected and the actions of one of us have consequences for others. The best defense against a pandemic is shared information and solidarity as the spread of the epidemic in any country endangers all of humanity. In other words, we won't be safe until we are all safe. As Yuval Noah Arari says in his article [In the battle against Coronavirus](#), it must be remembered "that epidemics spread rapidly even in the Middle Ages, long before the age of globalization" and in order to be protected by isolation, we would need to go back to the Stone Age. Therefore, if human beings need to come together to face adversity, as educators, we need to make a significant effort to keep students in touch with reality and promote collaboration and interaction as much as possible, and even more, when circumstances force us to stay behind the screens and human contact is reduced to what is considered strictly necessary. After all, what are we preparing students to do and how do we want them to feel?

2. Stimulating curiosity

Curiosity is what triggers the entire learning process. When curiosity is awake, paying attention is an unconscious and immediate reaction, which is fundamental to create knowledge. This emotional spark that represents curiosity should be considered by teachers in a conscious way while planning lessons. Thanks to neuroscience, we know that the emotional brain has neurons and circuits that get activated when something different appears in the environment. We get alert to what is different. Unfortunately, it's not always an easy task to surprise young people who live with their eyes glued to the internet, with something new. However, we can invite them to discover paths that they would hardly choose for themselves, through questions whose answers require reflection and not just a simple Google search. If we also get them to collaborate with students from other countries to be able to draw conclusions at the end of the road, they will develop not only knowledge, but skills that will



help them to be better communicators and also critical thinkers, who are respectful and curious with other cultures.

More than ever, teachers have an essential role to make curiosity spark in students' brains, to shake something inside that incites them to pay attention, think, share and wish to know more. If learning is the result of our thinking, therefore, it has to be conceived as an active process by teachers whose role is now to facilitate opportunities for thinking and make this thinking process visible in order to provide continuous and constructive feedback.

3. A practical example in the French class

a. Introduction:

In order to put these principles into practice, a collaborative project was proposed to high school students from different backgrounds, but following the same language program.

Context: the experience took place with a group of 16 years old students, in their first year of the IB Diploma Program. Language B course is an acquisition language course for non-beginner students. The level of language proficiency of the students covered a range between B1 and B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL).

The American School of Valencia, in Spain, and the Campion School, in Athens, agreed to put students together to work in mixed groups in order to explore and share thoughts about one of the topics of the program, *Identities*, and more specifically, *Language and Identity*. At the end of the experience students had to be able to answer and develop the question *How does language reflect our identity?*

b. Steps:

i. Introduction to the topic Language and Identity

It is a common and useful practice to start the class with a provocative resource to make students react while creating an environment that encourages dialog. Students, not the teacher, should find themselves the controversial point and develop their thoughts or opinions.

To introduce the topic Language and Identity, students were asked in class *Who are you? What identifies you?* The most immediate answers were their name, age and nationality. This is not a surprise, our name is the first thing we would all answer to the question *Who are you?* Then, they were asked if they would be someone different if they had a different name. The general answer was no, because it's just a word and we are more than that. It may be true, but the idea was to make them think about the importance of words so they were exposed to a video from France Info, [C'est du racisme à bas bruit](#), where a man called Mohamed Amghar was called Antoine in his enterprise by the will of his boss from the moment he signed his contract. This video was the hook that brought the students to ask themselves hundreds of questions about language and identity.

ii. Groups and initial support

The purpose of the first online meeting was to introduce each other, to communicate the work groups, the goals, content and dates of the project.

Three subtopics of research were planned as follows:

- Language and identity.
- Linguistic discrimination.
- Endangered languages.

Each of the groups had questions to answer and clues of research with links of articles, videos, audios, interactive maps and other resources.

iii. Making thinking visible and continuous feedback

Ron Ritchart & Mark Church in *The power of making thinking visible*, affirm that planning for thinking improves learning, deep understanding while developing students' engagement with others, with ideas and with action. Students become active communicative learners and teachers become students of their students in their role of facilitators. Formative assessment is not a task, it's a practice, and true formative assessment is the ongoing effort to understand students' learning. Besides, according to the authors, continuous good feedback needs to emerge from conditions of mutual learning and



collaboration and needs to be based on strengths and weaknesses. In fact, students will ignore feedback unless it's seen as useful and meaningful.

In our project, we followed the basis of Ron Ritchart & Mark Church's Understanding Map, making students follow a path while collaborating and sharing with their peers and teachers.



1. Discover the resources.
2. Comment, ask questions and ensure understanding with peers.
3. Make connections with previous knowledge.
4. Consider different points of view.
5. Build explanations supported with evidence.

Each group of students shared a Google Docs and a G. Slides to write their individual notes and were meant to share the information and ensure understanding with peers during their G.Meets. Teachers helped them to think deeper with questions and with additional sources when needed. Shared documents and online meetings were the opportunity for teachers to have evidence of students' understanding and thinking and different ways of feedback were possible but basically a natural open dialog with a mutual feedback between teachers and students took place. Besides, as students are working with shared documents, they are also able to provide peer feedback. Continuous feedback allows students to identify strengths and weaknesses and shows what to do next by reflecting and asking questions to complete ideas, suggesting new research for a better understanding, showing a different point of view to develop critical thinking, or asking for evidence to make the link to real life. Feedback is a teaching opportunity that makes us think in terms of collaboration rather than in correction and moves students forward in their learning.

iv. Sharing reflections and conclusions.

The end of the project arrived and all the groups of students made their presentations that were followed with comments, personal reflections, anecdotes and questions about Greece and Spain (*Is it the same in your country?*).

- From teacher's point of view:
 - collaborating with students from a different country made them develop academic, social and personal skills and seemed to have a better understanding of the topic Languages and Identity;
 - it was enriching also for teachers to work together;
 - In terms of practice of the French language, students used French in the meeting when teachers were present, but tended to speak English when there was no teacher;



- scheduling meetings was difficult due to incompatibility of school schedules and the time difference of one hour between Greece and Spain.
- Students feedback (after filling a form):
 - What they liked the most:
 - meeting with new people
 - learning about languages in a different way
 - learning about Greece/Spain
 - collaborate with other students abroad
 - learning from others
 - sharing ideas
 - What they would like to improve:
 - G.Meets were difficult to schedule
 - Other comments:
 - It was an enriching experience and they liked to meet and work with people from a different country;
 - they will repeat the experience.
 - 100% felt ready to talk/write about Language and Identity;

4. Conclusion

Although students need to be in the center of the learning process, teachers have an essential role to promote a culture of thinking and sharing in an atmosphere of security, empathy and respect that allow dialog and debate. But also, language teachers have the role of providing students with the link to the real world to understand the power of words and to respect linguistic and cultural diversity. Technology represents a powerful tool to open windows to the outside when we don't try to replace the magic of human interaction. Covid19 is reminding us of the essential, and the essential in education may be now to focus on promoting curiosity and opportunities of learning experiences beyond the walls of the classrooms or the lockdowns. As we wait for the end of this pandemic, and even later, let's try to humanize education in the broadest sense of the word and make it meaningful so that students can have the feeling that schools are meant to help us to understand ourselves and others, and to become better human beings.

References

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