JASM: Active Pedagogy for Foreign Language Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

JASM project (Janela aberta sobre o mundo: línguas estrangeiras, criatividade multimodal e inovação pedagógica no ensino superior) consists of an experience of active pedagogy with students of the undergraduate course in Media Studies at the School of Education in Viseu (Portugal). The main objective of JASM is to promote the acquisition of multilingual and multicultural skills and to generate multilingual awareness. In addition to the cognitive dimension, students explore the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of language. Experiences of artistic creativity (media arts, multimedia art, among others) enable multimodal communication in English and French, starting off with information gathering pertaining to the cultural and linguistic diversity of Viseu. After conducting research on the countries of origin of the chosen nationalities as well as the underlying cultures, the students, working in groups, found out about the life stories of migrants on the basis of interviews. Experiences of artistic creativity made it possible to exercise multimodal communication. An object or a tradition mentioned in the stories told by migrants allowed them to build a fictional story around the said object or tradition. Photos were taken at all stages of this work. A storyboard of each fictional story was developed. The Korsakow system made it possible to create dynamic documentaries. The disclosure of this learning experience is made public on the project site and through an e-book.The students' language level (written and oral comprehension and expression) was assessed at the start of the project, using tests. The intermediate evaluation is of a qualitative type as well as the final evaluation (interview type, carried out with students and teachers) due to COVID-19 crisis. The progress of the learning process, as well as the involvement of the teachers could thus be documented.

Keywords: *Project-based learning, higher education, foreign languages, interculturality, digital art.*

1. Introduction

From the perspective of constructivism and according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, individuals are active protagonists in their learning process, creating their own knowledge[1]. Different teaching practices are mobilised towards encouraging students to use new active learning tools, which ought to be consistent with the activities devised. Such activities involve experimentation, real-world problem solving tasks likely to allow for knowledge building, reflection and discussion [2]. Baviskar, Hartle and Whitney [3] identify four essential constituents in the classroom to apply the constructivism strategy: collecting prior student knowledge, creating new challenges in order to revise existing schemas, encouraging activities to evaluate new information and showing and reflecting on learning.

An example of this student-centred learning is the project-based learning "characterised by students' autonomy, constructive investigations, goal-setting, collaboration, communication and reflection within real-world practices" [4]. In the field of foreign language (FL) acquisition, the effect is the production of skills and a positive influence on the teaching and learning process: enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy for the students and motivation and satisfaction for the teachers [5]. The benefit for learners is the capacity to resolve advanced problems and to communicate proficiently [6]. Inquiry-based learning,

another effective method to promote student motivation [7], requires the learner to ask questions which s/he will try to answer by carrying out research and direct observation. Classes should be divided into small groups, allowing cooperation to accomplish shared goals, solve problems and acquire sounder knowledge [8].

In the context of Higher Education (HE), teaching FLs to students attending courses other than FL ones is not exempt from the need to turn them into active learners. Institutional constraints make certain approaches difficult. Project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, interdisciplinarity and cooperative learning are complementary ways to develop communication skills while using transversal and interdisciplinary skills. Direct contact with the real world and objective productions mean that students are involved in collaborative work. FLs are important for the job market, from recruitment to career progression, with a view to greater responsibility and better salaries [9] and the mastery of communicative skills in several FLs streamlines the market economy, to reach new target groups, establishing new lasting relationships, mainly the emotional dimension of languages.

The objectives of JASM project are to developed multilingual skills and multilingual awareness in undergraduates, through the mobilisation of different dimensions of language in a creative, collaborative and interdisciplinary manner.

2. FL learning in higher education in the 21st century

FL teaching within a HE context cannot disregard the need to innovate and to take into account new variables linked to the labour market and to the society's well-being. Teachers in HE are constantly forced to follow strategies focused on the students which aim to foster student motivation and develops their autonomy. The teacher's role is renewed in this approach to adapt to the path and needs of the learners.

Using modern educational methods facilitates student engagement, enhances analytical and innovative thinking, decreases apathy and leads to peer-learning [10].The goal is to help students by incorporating authentic study, creation and innovation practices into learning to achieve working life competencies [11]. The combination of different active learning methodologies, such as embodied learning, multiliteracies, project-based learning and inquiry-based learning will enable a holistic approach, leading to connected practices and techniques [12].

The core link among these methods is the fact that language is an inherent form of expression that relates to each one's identity and feelings, which frame the way people talk, interpret, or raise arguments. In this regard, art and multiliteracies related tasks can benefit from developing language competences, and vice-versa [13]. Actually, one can never learn a language apart from the acquisition and development of an intercultural competence [14].

3. FL activities, collaborative environment and interdisciplinarity

To implement constructivist instructional strategies in the classroom requires a learning environment based on knowledge sharing and classroom management among teachers (seen as guides) and students (small group work). This student-centred learning associated with ICT encourages social experience (work collaboration) in realistic contexts and the conscious knowledge construction process where alternative solutions are evaluated [2].

A key factor that facilitates the process towards active learning is the possibility of matching the natural inclinations of learners to play, create, express, collaborate and discover [13]. Among the cluster of active learning strategies, embodied learning connects the physical, artistic, emotional, and social, exploiting two natural dispositions in the learners - creativity and expression - and promotes innovation in teaching approaches.

The JASM project emerges within a classroom setting, and follows on beyond the four walls of a traditional classroom towards enabling each of the groups involved to find information pertaining to the lifestyles, culture, expectations, etc of some migrants of different nationalities of Viseu. The students are, thus, invited to practise language in context, experiencing the challenges and pitfalls of intercultural interactions with an extra motivation and the desired involvement for learning to occur.

4. The JASM project

The JASM project is carried out with 20 students attending the Media Studies Course at the School of Education in Viseu. Their career opportunities are to be found in the fields of journalism, production, organisation and management of information and institutional and organisational communication.

Besides the study plan, students attend courses in photography, digital art and intercultural communication.

The project aims to develop pedagogical innovation in HE concerning FLs in courses other than language ones. FL learning through social, cultural and artistic stimuli is promoted through the production of FL content using project-based learning in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity. It also intends to encourage good interdisciplinary practices developing knowledge and know-how in a collaborative and cooperative manner, and leading students to develop a multilingual and multicultural awareness using varied, creative and multimodal approaches.

4.1 Methodology

Five groups of 4 students were formed (cooperative learning). The project was presented and the goals and methodology debated (project-based learning). Each group had to select a different nationality among the most representative ones: Angolan, Belarusian, Indian, Italian and Ukrainian (statistic data from Portuguese Foreigners and Borders Service in Viseu, 2018), and carry out a study on the country, and illustrative of cultural and linguistic diversity (inquiry-based learning). All student productions were presented in both English and French to the academic community.

An extra photo seminar was held to support students' assignements (interdisciplinarity).The groups then had to meet a migrant living in the city. To do this, social networks enabled the exchange of information and the Local Centre for Support to the Integration of Migrants facilitated some contacts. The objective of the first appointment was to present the project and to conduct an interview (professional competences) so that students could write the story of the migrants' lives and take some photos, show important aspects of the life path of the person they interviewed and highlight facets of their personality. These assignments were also commented on during the FL course and were the starting point for the semi-annual student assessment.

The last phase, yet to take place, consists in the creation, by the students, of an animated film, based on a particular object or a tradition from the chosen migrant (exploration of material culture and digital scenography). A storyboard of each fictional story has been developed thanks to the Korsakow system, creating dynamic documentaries, under direction of a specialist on digital art. The productions will be disclosed on the JASM website, social networks, exhibitions, projections at events and will be published on an e-book.

4.2 Progress evaluation

The experience comprised a mixed-method design. Quantitative data were collected at the beginning, using speaking and writing tests. A first language level test was applied to the team of students involved (20), as well as to their colleagues in the class (12). The test was developed according to the CEFR levels, for written and oral comprehension and production, and it was inspired by the DELF, DALF and TOEFL tests. Response times were checked for each skills block.

The qualitative data were collected through interviews and observation. A second evaluation procedure was then carried out, based on an exchange of experiences between the students involved in the project and their colleagues, ascertaining of their feeling about their progress.

With the COVID-19 crisis, the final evaluation was also qualitative (interview type, carried outbystudents and teachers). All of the qualitative data were analysed descriptively.

5. Conclusion

As far as students are concerned the project enhanced curiosity, motivation, enthusiasm, creativity and autonomy, allowing linguistic, multicultural communication development, self-directed learning and collaborative skills.

From the teachers' point of view, the experience provided motivation and satisfaction as the JASM project evolved and progressed, in line with Vicheanpant and Ruenglertpanyakul's findings [15]. The teacher's role resembles, in this sense, that of a coach, rather than a traditional kind of teacher whose function is also to assess/examine.

This experience aims to open new perspectives towards a reflection on the teaching/learning process of FLs in HE, corollary to an experiment conducted with students of this level of education.

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