



Facing Homo Zappiens Online: Interactivity in a Multimodal Environment

Căpeneală Ionuț¹

Transilvania University from Braşov, Romania¹

Abstract

With the Covid-19 pandemic, education went online, and teachers faced a huge problem: how to motivate and involve students in a multimodal environment. Starting from the idea that interactivity is not defined by the type of the resources the teacher is using, but by the way in which the lesson is built, this research provides a solution for the lack of students' involvement and motivation during online classes. The target group of this project was represented by 64 students aged between 11 and 14, from Olga Gudynn International School in Voluntari, Romania. The students were studying French during an optional course at a beginner level – A1 according to CEFRL. The research was carried out from March 2020 until June 2020. The methodology included observation grids, tests, and a self-assessment questionnaire. The lessons I designed and taught were built using either apps – which have a good potential to be interactive, but also static documents, as PDFs for example, which are often considered unsuitable for being used as interactive resources. The results of the research were positive. The observation grids have shown that all the students' motivation and involvement increased. Moreover, the progress tests revealed that the students' communication competences also improved. The self-assessment questionnaire the students filled in at the end of the school year highlighted that the interacting with the digital content was the most enjoyable approach to learning French.

Keywords: *interactivity, motivation, involvement, apps, gamification*

1. Introduction

Once the COVID-19 pandemic started, the education in Romania went online and the teachers had to adapt their lessons to an environment so familiar to students, but so new to them. This research started from the questions: *What can I do in order to motivate and engage students during online lessons?, What if interactivity could be the key to unlock the new virtual school and offer the means to deal with the students' needs in terms of online education?*

The research focuses on the way in which students can interact with ICT, while the latter becomes a powerful tool for learning engagement. The web 2.0 (i.e. the Internet can be used in a collaborative and interactive way) was developed in order to meet the users' needs of interaction. So, when it comes to school, why don't we use it within the pattern of its original design and thus enhance interaction to structure the students' competences and increase their motivation and involvement during online lessons?

Defined as the ability to respond contingently to the learner's actions [1], the interactivity can be used in an online environment in various ways, one of them being the learner's interaction with the ICT [2]. It can be the *object* of interaction, a *participant* in interaction, or a *tool* for interaction [3]. In this paper, I will focus on ICT both as a participant in interaction and a tool for interaction, starting from the premise that these two approaches have the potential to motivate and involve students.

Interaction facilitates learning, but it is also a learning resource [4], and as the students interact with their textbooks in an offline environment, in an online environment they should be able to interact with the digital content.

Moreover, during the pandemic I observed some lessons, and the teachers used the ICT mainly as a tool for interaction, forgetting about its use as a participant in interaction, which can motivate students [5] and involve them into cognitive and metacognitive activities [6], thus turning the students into passive receivers of the information, and not active learners who structure some competences and acquire a new language.

Furthermore, nowadays students developed a set of characteristics, one of them being the preference for virtual symbols and technology [7], which means that they like to use the technology, and not to remain passive in front of a screen.



Nevertheless, using ICT in a lesson does not necessarily mean that it will be an interactive experience and that the students will enjoy it. The way in which it is used can ensure the lesson's success. It is necessary to understand that ICT cannot only be a tool for interaction, it can also become a participant in interaction, and its presence in a lesson does not necessarily mean a fun experience. ICT can also transform a static document (a PDF document, for example), in an interactive one, and, if wisely used, can create a meaningful context for structuring our students' competences, and increase their motivation and involvement.

2. Methodology

2.1 General information on the research

The target group of the research was represented by 64 students, aged between 11 and 14 years old from Olga Gudynn International School in Voluntari, Romania. The students were studying French during an optional course at a beginner level – A1 according to CEFRL. The research was carried out from March 2020 until June 2020, since the beginning of the pandemic until the end of the school year (which marks the first time when the schools in Romania went online).

As we moved online, we started using Zoom to teach our lessons, and as I was looking for a way in which I could involve students for a real-life experience, I discovered that I could give them the control over the screen I was projecting (via *Remote Control* and *Share Screen* functions provided by Zoom). Then, I started to adapt the lessons for the online environment, by using apps to structure the communication competences in French, according to the optional curriculum. During the lessons, while using the *Remote-Control* function and the *Share Screen* function, I allowed my students to get involved with the learning tasks, by directly interacting with the activities set for each lesson.

Nevertheless, I displayed static documents, as PDFs or Word Documents, and, used the *Annotate* function, to allow students to complete each task by interacting with the document. Thus, a static document which had no potential to be interactive, was used in an interactive way.

To measure the students' motivation and involvement, I applied observation grids, and to check if their communication competences improved, I applied progress tests, and I prepared a self-assessment questionnaire for the end of the school year in order to capture the students' perspective on the interaction with the digital content.

2.2 Examples of activities

Example 1: Using Bamboozle (www.bamboozle.com), and based on a text and some images, I designed some questions to check the reading comprehension. The class was split into two teams, and each team would choose a spokesperson to answer the questions. After naming the spokesperson, he/she would receive the remote control and would choose a card to turn, interacting with the exercise. After turning the card, the question would appear, and the student should answer it. If he/she doesn't know the answer, the other members of the team could help him/her. If the answer was right, one point would be assigned to the team. There were also extra-points for the luckier teams, and punishments for the less lucky ones – some squares may hide penalties (-5/-10 points) or rewards (extra-points) for the team that is choosing it. See Fig. 1

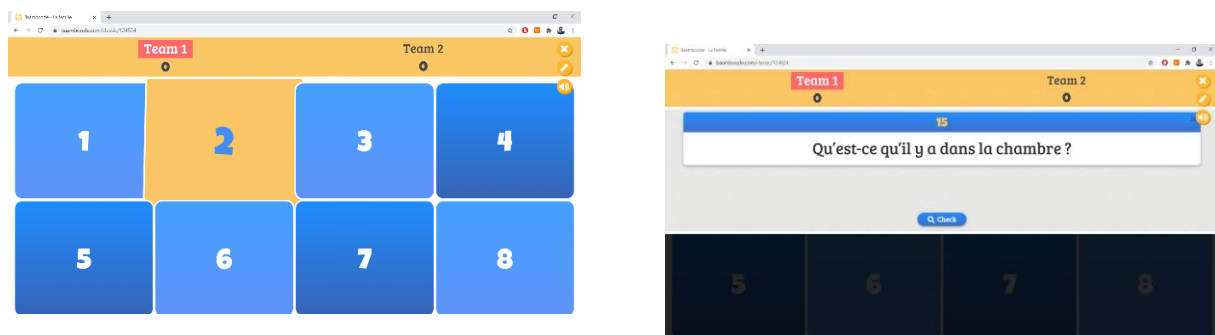


Figure 1: Bamboozle-based practice in screenshots



Example 2: Using a PDF document (a DELF Prim exercise [8]), the students were supposed to solve a listening exercise. The students were supposed to virtually raise their hand, each student would solve a task by circling the correct answer using the *Annotate* function. In this approach, the PDF document, which is supposed to be static becomes interactive, by allowing the students to interact with it while solving the task (see Fig.2).

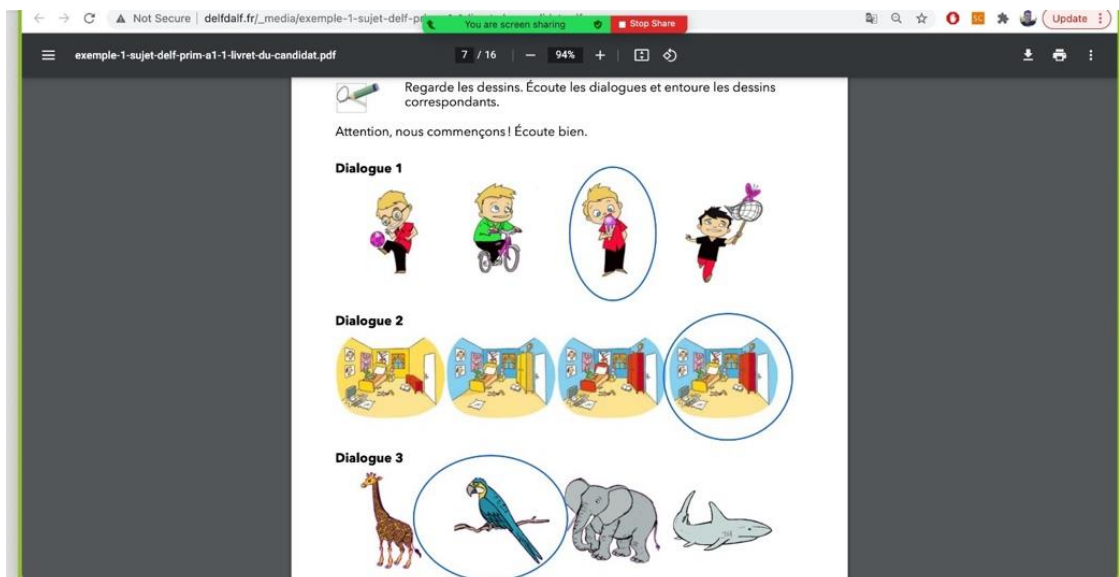


Fig. 2. Students use the annotate function to solve a listening comprehension task

3. Results

Motivation increased. As the observation grids have shown, all the students' motivation increased, as they found this approach funny. Analysing the observation grids, I concluded that students enjoyed most the activities where they were supposed to play a game via remote control, being a good context for active learning and increasing students' confidence in a natural way.

Better involvement. The students' involvement also increased. Analysing the observation grids, I noticed that there weren't any students who didn't want to answer during classes. Moreover, if at the beginning of the online school they were reluctant to turn on their cameras, they started to do it during the French classes. At first, only few of the students turned on their camera, but as I started to use the interactive approach, they gradually shown up, because they wanted to be more visible and to have more chances to receive the remote control.

Improved competences. The progress tests shown that the students' competences in French improved, most of them managing to reach the A1.1 level by the end of the school year. The most notable change was in their speaking competence, as they needed to use the French language in order to participate in the activities. The progress oral task showed that at the end of the school year, all students were able to speak about how they feel, to locate an object or to describe it.

Fun. As the results of the self-assessment questionnaire show, the students found this activity funny, most of them stating that interacting with the apps via remote-control and annotate was one of the most enjoyable things during online classes. Most of the students answered that they found funny the way in which they were able to interact with the games. There is also the case of two students who stated that even the worksheets were funny, and they would rather solve all the worksheets online. One student answered that it was interesting to have access to the teacher's computer.

4. Conclusions

There is no such thing as THE document that can ensure the interactivity of a lesson, as there is no type of document that can be used only in a static way. Being interactive or not it's all about the way in which we use it. We shouldn't see ICT only as a tool to teach, but also a participant in interaction which can be a reliable partner in teaching. Allowing students to interact with the content of a lesson



can ensure the interactivity of an activity and can bring an element of novelty in the online class. Nevertheless, it is not novelty by the technological tool use in itself but in terms of a more student-oriented dynamic of the educational process. As shown above, students mainly appreciated when they took control over the content. The remote allowed them to be more confident and by that, more engaged in their own learning.

As this research proved, adopting an interactive way in teaching French can improve students' communication competences, increase their involvement and their motivation, and it can be fun.

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