Innovation and Creativity in Uncanny Times. Teaching Strategies in Language Teaching

Silva Elisabete Mendes[1]; Martins Cláudia[2]

Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, Portugal & University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies[1]
Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, Portugal & University of Aveiro Centre for Language, Literature and Culture & University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies[2]

Abstract

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it might be a truism to state that education and, consequently, the teaching-learning process have undergone a major shift and both teachers and students experienced either beneficial or negative learning situations which gave them insight into a brave new world of technology highlighting both its potentials as well as its hazards. Nonetheless, regardless of the struggles, these uncanny and challenging times forced teachers to make the most of the new online context to keep students engaged in learning, using the available technologies, and easily accessed by students. As such, as English language lecturers in higher education, we also had to adapt and come up with more innovative strategies so that students could practise not only linguistic skills, but also others, such as critical thinking and creativity. Based on our teaching experience during the last year and a half, in this paper we aim to present some activities, developed under a project-based approach, that the students were challenged to carry out, namely a coronavirus journal or vlog, a video CV and a multimodal essay. By showing some of the students' works and how they reacted to the proposed tasks, we will prove the innovation and efficacy of such strategies in the language learning and teaching process.

Keywords: *Language learning, innovation, creativity, project-based learning, language teaching strategies.*

1. Introduction

Without a doubt, the Covid-19 pandemic assailed the world in an unprecedented manner. Teaching also faced sudden and, sometimes, drastic, changes. Both teachers, students and education stakeholders had to adapt overnight to a new daunting and truly challenging reality. The states of emergency declared around the world forced millions of people to deal with curfew, lockdown, furlough and quarantine. During the first lockdown, in March 2020, schools and universities in Portugal shut down and all the teaching-learning system had to be reorganised and redesigned for a new context: the digital one. For the next year and a half, the education system dealt, on the one hand, with digital frailties and social disparities regarding this new learning setting, but, on the other, it acknowledged and fostered the potentialities of the online modality. Synchronous, asynchronous lessons, learning platforms – Colibri-Zoom, Google Meet or google Teams, only to mention a few – became part of our normal routine while working from home. As teachers of English as a foreign language, we also felt the need to change our teaching methodologies and strategies under the (unavoidable) sway of the online context. Therefore, in this paper, we will present and reflect on the work carried out by students under a project-based learning approach, where the student, at the centre of learning, should be able to carry out assigned tasks in a rather autonomous way. In addition, our major concern was to keep students engaged in language learning, fighting against demotivation when confronted with these uncanny times, whilst they also developed 21st century skills: critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration.

2. 21st century skills: innovation and adaptability to the digital learning context

The upsurge of technology-based learning and the unsurmountable potential of the world wide web introduced a new paradigm in learning and teaching. We come forward as non-defenders of prescriptive teaching methodologies and, as such, we uphold the idea that we must change our teaching practices, some more traditional than others, to meet the demands and challenges of this

new digital era, forcing us to rethink the learning process [1]. Developing skills for the 21st century becomes of paramount importance in a global world that needs to be more inclusive and socially and environmentally conscious. Students need to learn how to learn, reflect and interact [2]. According to Laura Greenstein [3], "students will need to think critically and creatively, to communicate and collaborate effectively, and to work globally to be productive, accountable citizens and leaders of their world." (p. 2). Digital skills are also paramount to boost people's potential as confident and active citizens, as we can read on EU SCIENCE HUB [4]. More innovative methodologies and strategies need to be enforced so that one can adapt to the new digital learning context, but the same time without losing sight of the need to enhance digital literacy, i.e. "the ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information" (cf. Stony Brook University Libraries [5]). According to Cooper & Murphy [6] the design of innovative activities "grounded in deep instructional methodologies", such as project-based learning, "can make the learning experience both modern and meaningful. When filled with agency and empathy, and empowered by dynamic real-world skills, today's learners can undoubtedly change the world around them." The examples that follow show how simple, but innovative, ideas can foster students' creativity and critical thinking while, at the same time, keep them motivated.

3. Students' works under a project-based approach

All the activities described here were carried out by 3rd year students of the BAs in Languages for international Relations and Foreign Languages: English and Spanish studying English, during the second semester of 2020 and the academic year 2020-2021. We focus only on two of them, explaining how we came up with these ideas and how students reacted to them. The activities were developed under a project-based approach, aiming to foster the development of thinking skills, where critical thinking, creativity and problem solving are included [3] [6], alongside the exploration of technological tools available online, improving thus their digital competences.

3.1 Coronavirus Journal / Vlog

This activity was based on an idea put forward by Katherine Sharp Landdeck on *Time* Magazine. Landdeck emphasised the importance of keeping coronavirus journals to "preserve the stories that are so often lost to the past" [7] in a way to already start studying COVID-19, interesting times for "doctors and historians". As a project work to be developed throughout the semester, the purpose of this activity was to challenge students to keep their own coronavirus journal or vlog. Students should record or write a few paragraphs every week or every two weeks, reporting on their week, e.g. how school was going (if some uneventful thing came out related to Covid-19), what the media reported, any science advancements regarding a vaccine (still under development then). They could also simply put forth their feelings about the pandemic and the impact it had on the world, more generally, and on their country and community, more specifically. While they were reporting on a real and life-changing event, they were also being critical about the world around them. Some students maximised their creativity, as figure 1 illustrates. This student recorded her own coronavirus journal and she excelled in her work. Titled "Self-quarantine", this video shows the student's creativity and critical thinking as she was reflecting on the pandemic and its consequences and the impact it had on her life. She also made good use of technological devices that allowed her to record and edit the video. Some students kept a written coronavirus journal, as figure 2 illustrates.

Fig. 1. Example of a coronavirus journal in video form

Fig. 2. Example of a coronavirus journal in writing

3.2 Multimodal Essay

The underlying idea for a more innovative, and thus less traditional, approach to composing essays relies on the need for students to develop their digital skills and digital literacy, as mentioned above. In order to become an effective digital composer or writer in our current world, we must be ready to make use of digital technology, communication tools and networks, as Stony Brook University Libraries argue [5].

On the one hand, multimodal essays may refer to the creation of texts that are digital in their nature. According to Roland [8], digital stories "are multimedia movies that combine photographs, video, animation, sound, music, text, and often a narrative voice". They can either be used as an artistic approach or as a means to show one's view on a specific topic. The fact that these final products, usually on a video format, can be easily uploaded onto the WWW makes them a particularly useful tool with potential multiple uses. In terms of criteria to be considered and implemented, Lambert [9] puts forth seven important elements for a digital story/text: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, the gift of your voice, the power of the soundtrack, economy and pacing.

On the other hand, we must also focus on another subsidiary concept which is multimodal literacy, because, besides mastering digital media, one should also be able to grapple with multimodality. For Walsh [10], multimodal literacy refers to the meaning-making process that occurs through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimedia and digital texts and at present largely amplified due to the ubiquity of media.

Incidentally, Kim & Belcher [11] name this practice as digital multimodal composing, which, for these authors, mean "writing as the social practice of meaning making using various semiotic tools".

Therefore, we have a combo of something that became a social practice but evolved from an activity that was already in place, adapting to the 21st century demands.

Below we present 3 examples of multimodal essays: Fig. 3 represents the essay by two students who not only worked on the soundtrack and included text, images and colour, but also acted out their discussion as if they were housemates conversing on the topic of marriage and adoption by homosexual couples; Fig. 4 is taken from a one-man essay, where the student acted out several characters that approached the topic of human rights applied to Mozambique while under the Portuguese rule; at last, Fig. 5 presents a less creative and multimodal essay that was clearly the result of transferring a written text to the recording of what was then turned into a video.
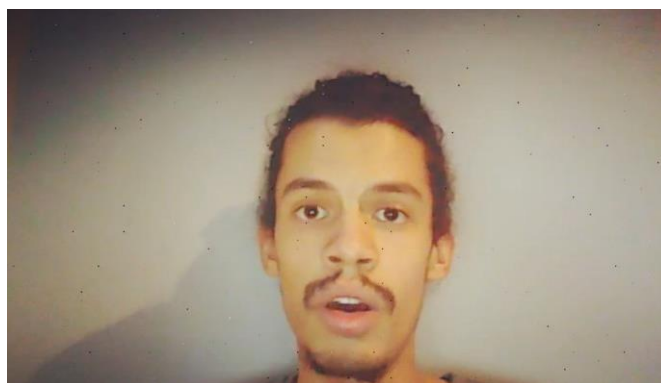

Fig. 3. Multimodal essay 1
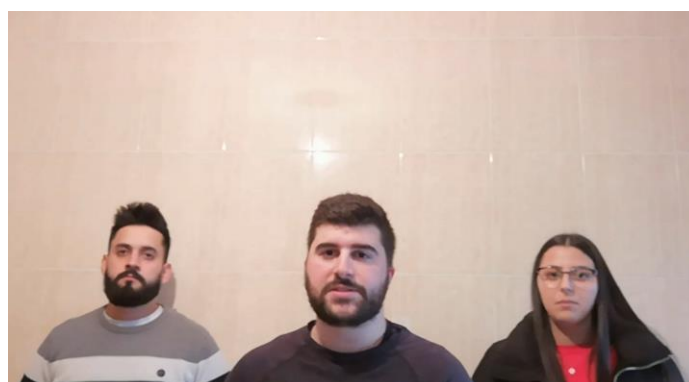
Fig. 4. Multimodal essay 2

Fig. 5. Multimodal essay 3

Conclusion

In this short paper, we sought to present some of the activities we asked our students to develop during the pandemic context, when all levels of education were forced to teach and learn from home. As we explained above, we opted for a project-based approach and attempted to intertwine both a conscious and reflexive covid diary and the discussion of relevant current affairs with the enhancement of digital skills, so central to the 21st century education.

In our teaching practice, we aimed to develop students' creativity, digital skills and multimodal literacy, as well as to request them to work out of their comfort zone. As Kim & Belcher [11] put it, "The growing pervasiveness of digital communication, however, has led to more frequent arguments for inclusion of digital multimodal composing" and, thus, we chose the covid diary and the multimodal essay as students' project work.

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