Chapter # 18

ACTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF ACTORS

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ABSTRACT

The digital age and Generation Z are key features within the current panorama of teaching-learning practices in higher education and drive innovative student-centred strategies, oriented towards the reality of the labour market. The article describes an experience of pedagogical activation carried out through project-based learning using digital tools, with undergraduate Media Studies students of the School of Education in Viseu (Portugal), towards the acquisition of skills in French and English, during the academic year 2021-2022. The objective was to renew teaching practices, so as to foster greater student motivation on the part of forthcoming media professionals, by enhancing their competences and confidence with concern to spoken and written interaction within the context of foreign languages for specific purposes. The dynamics of learning combined with authentic contexts and digital tools, encourages teachers to rethink their methodology and objectives, in order to be more innovative. One accounts for the chosen strategy and the various steps followed, evaluates the path of both students and teachers, analyses the benefits, the drawbacks and the impact in terms of acquired skills and concludes with reflections for forthcoming work projects.

Keywords: higher education, foreign language, specific purposes, project pedagogy, digital tools, transversal competences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concern with teaching-learning innovation, regardless of the age group, is not new. At the higher education (HE) level, it has also become a consistent focal point in the studies/research aimed at improving teaching practices and learning performances.

In *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European HE Area* (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, European Students' Union, European University Association, and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, 2015), the European Network for Quality Assurance in HE recalls some fundamental principles in this area: students' active role in their own learning process and the relevance of student-centred learning to stimulate motivation, self-reflection and engagement, which encourages learner autonomy, while ensuring guidance from the teacher.

The Higher Education Assessment and Accreditation Agency (2021) stresses the importance of valuing transversal skills, communication and collaborative and multidisciplinary work, adopting active learning methodologies.

Pedagogical engineering has seen strong progress in recent years, particularly in vocational pathways in HE. The predominant classical model of knowledge transfer has evolved towards a pedagogy focused on the student and on his/her professional and social adaptation (Boelen & Chaubet, 2020). Due to the use of digital tools, the project-based learning (PBL) process is encompassed within the perspective of the socio-constructivist active methodologies, bringing about an easier development of transversal skills and the acquisition of student autonomy (Jones, 2019).

This experience of the active learning of foreign languages (FL) in HE constitutes a follow up to previous work by the authors, corollary of the conclusions of the studies undertaken within the LEE project framework (Costa Lopes et al., 2018) and JASM project (Delplancq et al., 2021). The experimental design follows the PBL methodology, with 24 undergraduate Media Studies students of the School of Education (ESEV) of the Polytechnic Institute in Viseu (Portugal). The objective is to describe this experience from the point of view both of the students and the teachers, and to show how PBL, combined with the use of digital tools, makes it possible to mobilise the transversal skills necessary for the field work profiles and students' professional competences, to increase students and teachers' motivation and to work on soft skills, in addition to the hard skills acquired within the curricular unit (CU).

2. ACTIVE LEARNING IN HE

Several studies have pointed out the limits of the teaching methodologies traditionally used in HE and stressed the importance, for learners, of an awareness of how to be, of teamwork and productive interactions, with the aim of acquiring autonomy and the ability of evaluating the process in a student-centred learning environment (Bégin-Caouette, Champagne-Poirier, Loiola, Beaupré-Lavallée, & Paradis, 2021). The urgent need to provide students with hard and soft skills confirms these limitations of traditional teaching, with the risk of an artificial understanding on the part of students. In this scenario, the investigational dimension, valued in the academic and professional context today (Guo, Saab, Post, & Admiraal, 2020), is also missing.

Pedagogical activation requires a real commitment from students in their learning process, whose progression can only occur on the basis of their ideas, their proposals and their fulfilment, which require the completion of concrete tasks (St-Jean & Dupuis Brouillette, 2021). The benefits are varied for students: greater motivation, better preparation for the labour market with the implementation of situations closer to reality, a more open work environment (Jung, Ruth, & Donghun, 2017), among others. To promote proactivity, autonomy and critical thinking, which are key competences in today's global reality, active learning involves the use of active methodologies. Students acknowledge that they prefer interactive dynamic classes, which focus on practice and on a fruitful exchange between the lecturer and themselves (Sousa, Cruz, Santos, & Cândido, 2018).

One of the well-known examples of pedagogical activation is PBL, where student involvement is ensured by the research activities they have to carry out to develop a project, conducive to the construction of knowledge and the production of content and subject-matters related to the real world of their training field (Krajcik & Shin, 2014). The guiding dimensions in designing the strategies are the learning objectives, student participation in dynamic activities, collaborative work, the use of technologies and the creation of feasible artefacts, so as to guarantee the success of the project linked to the training objectives and closely connected to professional demands.

The methodology developed by the teacher in this context should also include an appropriate structure for the development of interaction and individual responsibility, digital tools for collaboration, information processing and production, motivating and suitable tasks for teamwork and a feedback routine at all stages of the process (Fournier-St-Laurent, Normand, Desrosiers, & Bernard, 2019). In this scenario, the use of digital tools allows the teacher to prepare motivating tasks to be carried out in a collaborative way within the classroom. Thus s/he tries to overcome students' reluctance. The presentation, at the beginning of the course, of a clear rationale and framework for the planned strategies,

the approach to the class, the dynamic management of interactions, the support of the teacher as learning progresses and the clarity and transparency of the assessment process are other key factors for success.

The implementation in the classroom of a culture of sharing, of self-evaluation and other evaluation, with students involved in a collaborative assessment source of construction of knowledge and skills also contributes to the updating of learning (Soubre, 2021).

3. ACTIVE LEARNING USING DIGITAL TOOLS IN FL TEACHING IN HE

In HE training courses other than specialised FL ones, the search for student motivation and the incentive to work with FL according to labour market needs, among other aspects, require an increased effort from teachers, in a process of constant reflection on their practices, their positioning and consequent updating.

Digital tools should allow for learning processes to be re-designed (Habowski, Conte, & Trevisan, 2019). The rational use of social media in FL learning in HE has proven to be a powerful aid for the ease of access and the motivation and attention it induces in students, digital natives of the 21st century (Oliveira, Brasileiro, Rodrigues, & Ferreira, 2020). The study by Saqr, Fors and Nouri (2018) highlights a positive correlation between student performance, classroom interaction and student-centred methodology using social media in HE.

Even though Pikhart and Botezat (2021) state that this methodology needs further studies and analysis for its real impact to be understood; much as they insist on the role of the teacher and on the fact that several variables may have an impact on digital learning, highlighting age, personality, motivation and students' abilities, both teachers and students respond positively to the pedagogical implementation of the use of social media

Embedded in collaborative learning of FL skills, the use of social media improves student participation and interest in training and the level and quality of teaching (Eghtesad, 2020). Facebook and Instagram are social networks regularly referenced in the specialised literature. However, the success of FL learning in this framework is not inseparable from the underlying methodology (Delplancq et al., 2019).

The PBL experience reported in this article took place in the 2021-2022 academic year and concerns a group of HE students in Portugal involved in the learning of French and English as FL. It presents the methodology followed, introducing social networks as agents of motivation, sharing and creativity, describes the working strategies developed along the way and discusses the results in the context of previous studies.

4. ACTIVE FL LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN HE IN PORTUGAL

4.1. Experimental group

The 24 students involved attended the FL option *FL applied to the new media and cyberspace*, a CU taught in the 2nd year of the undergraduate Media Studies Course in ESEV during the 2nd semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. This course aims to train media professionals in the fields of journalism, audio-visual production and direction and communication consultancy and promotes research in these areas. Throughout the 4 semesters of the first 2 years of the course, it offers compulsory training in FL with 12 ECTS, that can be complemented with the optional CU mentioned above, to which 4 ECTS are allocated, this requires 45 hours of actual lessons and 63 hours of independent student work. At this point in their training, students have already attended CU within the audio-visual field, information and communication technology, journalism, photography and cyber culture.

4.2. Framework

The working methodology proposed to students rests on a PBL perspective, using digital tools in a collaborative environment, likely to foster the acquisition of autonomy in the preparation and completion of tasks. It aims to deepen previously acquired knowledge in FL and to consolidate work on FL skills through activities devised within the framework of projects to be developed during the semester, mobilizing FL skills and transversal and interdisciplinary competences, essential for students' future professional life. The themes for the projects were of free choice, but with the requirement they disclose the reality seen in society and feasible in terms of the collection of diverse and sufficient material to work regularly throughout the semester using digital tools. As a result, they should also allow for presentations in the classroom and original and creative publications thereafter.

4.3. Methodology

The two teachers (one English-speaking, the other French-speaking) worked together concerning the preparation of lessons, their implementation in the classroom, and all the required guidance and corrections. The work proposal was presented by the teachers to the students in the 1st session of the semester. Besides defining the work methodology and the learning strategies, the presentation also focused on the theoretical framework, on the justification of the adopted approach, on the project development stages, on the evaluation phases (of the project, of the students by the teachers, of the students among themselves, of self-evaluation and of the teachers by the students), on the expectations and expected results, and on the dissemination of this work. All the students agreed, showing enthusiasm and interest in participating in the experiment. The teachers also put forward a negotiable proposal for evaluation, based on the principle of continuous evaluation, with regular delivery of assignments on the *Moodle* platform and a grade based on participation and publications in terms of originality, quality and creativity throughout the semester. It obtained a favourable opinion from students.

A class representative was elected. The students organised themselves into groups, without any particular indications, and 8 groups of 3 elements each were created. Each group had to choose a spokesperson. The students were given one week to decide which social network(s) they wanted to favour for sharing the work and the name(s) of the account(s). They also had to define the project theme and develop a work plan.

The evaluation of the FL level was planned for the 2nd session. It was based on the 4 usual written and oral skills of comprehension and expression, on the basis of original tests designed according to the principles of the CEFR and inspired by the DELF, DALF and TOEFL tests. The response time was controlled for each block of skills. The average level in English was between B1 and B2 for the 4 skills; concerning French, it was B1 for comprehension and A2 for expression.

In this same session, the groups had to present their projects to the class in both FL. The themes chosen were drug use, visually impaired persons' communication problems, academic traditions, urban sport, inequalities in sport, animals within society, mental health and the Army. Improvements were introduced based on the interaction with teachers and colleagues. The work plans were revised and delivered on the *Moodle* platform, of open consultation to all registered students. The *Facebook* group was created for the whole class, ensuring that the demands for confidentiality be met alongside with the request for institutional authorizations and invitations to follow the publications. Some student groups decided to go ahead with *Instagram* accounts as well. Requests were sent to the interviewees concerning the proposed themes, in order for students to collect more knowledge for a better reflection. Then, the students started the contacts for the interviews, that could be done in person or remotely (mail, telephone, *Zoom*), but with the necessary image archive.

The teachers supervised the preparation of the list of contact entities and the drafting of the requests, as well as all the interview scripts.

In the middle of the semester, the team's expert in photography and digital art led a 90-minute session about *Documentary Recording*. He reinforced the idea that creativity was one of the essential abilities to distinguish oneself in the labour market, and that the specialised skills for the future profession should come alongside with other skills, namely in terms of digital tools. He developed his intervention around the quality of the image and the material, the relationship between the private space and the public sphere, and the transmission of information through images, for a relevant documentary photography. The students evaluated this session as very positive, as it allowed them to have a new look on the project productions. At this time of the year, students and teachers took stock of the work carried out so far and reflected on the difficulties encountered and the consequent improvements. The teachers had to help in the reorientation of some projects (urban sport, mental health and the armed forces), in order to overcome the lack of responses to the interviews. They also had to encourage all the groups to show more creativity.

Throughout the semester, the groups carried out image capture and interviews. All texts and posts for social networks were corrected by the teachers and presented to the class. This way, the various language competences were improved, which required collaborative work, together with the acquisition of autonomy in the completion of the assignments, with corresponding flexibility and rapid adaptation to the situation. The weekly self- and peer-evaluation and teachers' remarks ensured the logic of the learning path and confirmed that all students were comfortable with the project, but also allowed for a better identification with the tasks on their part, the creation of a working environment favourable to the integration of all students in this new methodological learning environment, a constant repositioning in terms of quality, and a reflection on the creativity and impact of the productions in FL. To boost the creative spirit, teachers encouraged the use of online design platforms to diversify the images associated with the publications.

The productions that resulted evolved over time in terms of language level, diversity in genres (theoretical and opinion articles, reports, interviews, ...) and creativity and dynamism concerning the publications. Students moved from simple editing of images with captions to proposing more elaborate and attractive posts. The work delivered for assessment purposes confirmed this evolution. However, it is important to say that teachers' availability in this learning model must be highly above that of the traditional one. Support was given both inside and outside the classroom, with very short response times on the part of teachers, so as not to delay the work progress. Thus, in addition to the 3 hours per week in the classroom, each teacher devoted approximately 3 more hours outside the classroom to solve student queries and correct activities concerning all the groups.

A final qualitative assessment was carried out at the end of the semester. Each group had to present and justify in both FL, orally and in writing, the whole route taken and make a synthesis of the publications. This reflection also formalised their self-evaluation concerning the project work and the improvement of FL skills and of transversal and complementary competences. The class was then asked to participate in other evaluation both of colleagues and teachers and in the evaluation of the methodology itself. The quantitative assessment of the FL level evolution was carried out through the evaluation of the assignments presented, published and delivered on the *Moodle* platform.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It is recommendable that the experiment be repeated using other digital tools, accessible through smartphone applications. It would be interesting to complete the research team with

a specialist in digital communication, who could also help boost students and teachers' creativity.

6. DISCUSSION

PBL is clearly a motivating methodology for the students involved. Together with digital tools, it allows for the development of FL skills in HE, but also of transversal competences, essential for entering the labour market. A strict organization is required at the beginning of the tasks and the establishment of a culture of sharing, self-evaluation and constructive criticism, as well as the acquisition of a form of autonomy which is vital for the successful completion of the tasks. The students reacted very well to this methodology, showing enthusiasm and concern for improving their performance from the outset. The *Moodle* platform proved to be a vital tool for sharing information and work, prior to its dissemination.

Considering the CU quantitative results, we can state that the FL level of all students increased by one degree, both at the oral and written levels. From the monitoring of the activities and the qualitative evaluation (carried out through conversations on the basis of questions and free comments) throughout and at the end of the semester, we can conclude that students appreciated the freedom in choosing the theme of their projects and in designing the course. They acknowledged having acquired autonomy and being more comfortable with communicating in FL. Students considered the session on photography as beneficial and the follow-up (suggestions, reorientation, corrections) by the teachers as very useful. They acknowledged that they found it difficult to take advantage of all the benefits of autonomy, even regarding the collaborative nature of the work, namely due to the lack of innovative ideas and creativity in the various stages of the activities. Students spontaneously confessed that they preferred conformism in the tasks and in the use or research of new digital tools to make the final result more attractive.

It was very important to observe student attitudes, their behaviour, their evolution, to be able to confirm whether they are comfortable with the adopted methodology. It was not just a question of CU evaluation.

The role of the teaching staff is clearly to be well aware of the demands of the course they're teaching, which requires new strategies, an excellent knowledge of the challenges of the course at issue and its realities, flexibility, immediate adaptability, increased availability, even outside the classroom, help with reorientation when a problem arises and the ability to offer various types of support besides the one having to do with the FL. For example, to cope with the delays related to the lack of answers to the interviews, the teachers had to adjust the tasks in several sessions, proposing interviews at ESEV or research on the subject to, among other ideas, write opinion articles and compare with other realities across the world. This was a problem in all groups, independently of the theme chosen. In a way that might seem paradoxical, this kind of support is much more demanding and requires much more work and rigour than the preparation of lessons within the traditional methodology, but it is also much more rewarding considering the learning environment, inside and outside the classroom. The preparation of the sessions must follow strict criteria in terms of work rhythm, timetable and evaluation. Teachers had to get to know digital tools better immediately, identifying the ones easily manageable in the school context, essentially with the use of the smartphone and sporadic help from the computer. In order to arouse more creativity, they had to exemplify cases of good practices.

7. CONCLUSION

The learning experience described aims to be a contribution to the process of pedagogical innovation for the teaching of FL in HE. PBL, together with the use of social networks and digital tools, allows for the reinforcement of linguistic skills combined with social and cultural knowledge in this experience of working with FL in the aforementioned undergraduate Media Studies course. Enabling students to choose their project themes and the work methodology to achieve it, while mobilising transversal skills specific to their future profession, helped to improve not only their motivation, sense of responsibility, autonomy and competences in FL, but also the level of practice essential to adapt to the labour market. The activities were organised with the same objective: to produce relevant, original material in both FL, within the scope of the defined project, for oral and written sharing during lessons and for public dissemination.

Learning was based on collaborative work, fruitful interactions in the implementation of authentic contexts, inside and outside the classroom. Different communication aspects were worked on and not only in FL: communication within a team, in the classroom and during the evolution of projects (interviews, news, videos, …). To develop their work, the students had to do research, find contacts, look for creative ideas for the presentation of their productions in the different social networks and in the classroom. They had to show constructive critical thinking towards the work of their colleagues and self-criticism. The difficulties encountered in carrying out their projects forced them to be flexible and to question themselves, seeking solutions to their problems and adapting quickly to the stumbling blocks of the work in progress.

All groups of students encountered the same difficulties: being creative for a better dynamic presentation of the accomplished work, knowing how to reorient the work plan and strategies to circumvent the unexpected and offering constructive criticism.

Thus, it is at all these different levels, in addition to the obvious help in FL, that teachers play a major role. With monitoring and reinforcement on their part, students quickly end up by renewing the learning environment and welcoming the new approach with another look. Teachers' role evolves from *sage on the stage to guide on the side*, with teachers feeling the need to review their working strategies, update their own knowledge and show more creativity, flexibility, availability, dynamism and adaptability. Teachers have to mobilise skills other than those specific to FL learning in HE. They have to be closely aware of the course objectives and study plans, the students' profiles and the needs of the labour market. They also require extensive knowledge of the topics covered and the tools used. Only in this way can they provide guidance and monitoring of the learning journey inside and outside the classroom. This implies an investment of time and energy, which goes well beyond the simple preparation of the course sessions and the classic evaluation process. This path knows neither routine nor habits; it is in perpetual evolution during the semester and from year to year. It therefore requires a search for improvements in both students' and teachers' practices, and a constant adaptation to new tools and new demands. Providing specific training competences to the forthcoming media professional and accommodating FL work into a professional practice framework allows students to better understand the interest and importance of FL, and also to better identify with their educational path.

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