

10 From face-to-face to online in foreign language teaching: an outstanding experience

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Abstract

In December 2019, the University of Oxford Language Centre started to offer online courses in French, Spanish, and German at an advanced level. This not only enabled the Language Centre to pilot a new way of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teaching ahead of the unprecedented 2020 health crisis, but also to open and expand ‘Oxford to the world’. The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of this innovative online teaching project based on the implementation of a two-hour weekly asynchronous teaching schedule through carefully designed ‘learning pathways’. These focused on an interactive multimodal learning environment, which included discussions, grammar quizzes, and videos. This project confirmed the initial hypothesis that asynchronous teaching was the best method for students with different language competencies and learning styles as they were not time-bound and were able to work at their own pace.

Keywords: multimodal, asynchronous/asynchrony, learning pathways, discussions, quizzes.

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1. Introduction

It is clear that in this new global society, multilingualism has become a real asset in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. A progressive internationalisation of both the worlds of education and work has contributed to the growing importance of individuals' linguistic abilities in MFLs. There has been a significant decline in higher education institutions offering MFLs at degree level in the UK since 2008 (Polisca, Wright, Álvarez, & Montoro, 2019). However, recent trends show a substantial rise in credit and 'non-credit' bearing modules offered by what has become known as university Wide Language Programmes (WLPs) (Polisca et al., 2019) which provide students from all disciplines with the opportunity to be part of this multilingual turn. In December 2019, an online language teaching project was launched by the University of Oxford Language Centre as part of their WLP. It piloted an innovative method of delivering MFL lessons ahead of the unprecedented health crisis and expanded 'Oxford to the world'. This chapter presents the B2 Spanish as a foreign language learning pathway of this project, which followed a communicative and plurilingual approach².

2. Presentation of the project

2.1. Considerations about online teaching and learning

Traditionally, the MFL teaching and learning process is commonly conceived as a dynamic relationship between the teacher, preferably a native speaker, and the students, in a face-to-face environment such as a classroom or an immersion setting in the target language. In this relationship, educators become the principal source of knowledge (Dewey, 1929), acting as facilitators of the learning process and providing modulating structures, interaction patterns, and feedback. MFL teachers themselves have subscribed to this belief and their experiences as

2. A distinction between multilingualism and plurilingualism is made following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001). Multilingualism refers to the knowledge of several languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society, whereas plurilingualism refers to individuals who speak several languages: <https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97>

learners have become a key factor in their cognitions as prospective instructors (Borg, 2006). McQuiggan (2012) maintains that teachers’ “initial teaching model is typically born from that of their teachers, and they teach as they were taught” (p. 27), something Lortie (1975) considers the ‘apprenticeship of observation’.

Teaching is intrinsically connected to market demands (Salavati, 2016) and the global trend of moving from analogue to digital has had an enormous effect on the modern education system. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, it was evident that the establishment of online teaching and learning was a matter of ‘when’ and not ‘if’. With the pandemic, educational institutions were forced to act on their prospective plans and to quickly adapt their teaching materials as learning could no longer be held in the classroom. Teachers have had to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar (Gregory & Salmon, 2013), and myths contrasting “the ‘theatre of the classroom’ and the rich social tapestry of the campus with a barren, solitary, inhuman online experience consisting of no more than downloading texts and submitting assignments” (Felix, 2003, p. 27) must be questioned, if not dispelled. This does not mean that educators will be left as supporting actors. In online learning and teaching, a symbiosis between teachers and technology is created as “without the intervention [of] a creative teacher, the Web, and the Internet can at best function as a convenient materials resource and communication vehicle” (Felix, 2003, p. 118).

2.2. Implementation of the project

Advanced online French, German, and Spanish courses were offered during Trinity Term 2019 at the University of Oxford Language Centre as a project led by the Head of Modern Languages. Classrooms were left behind and time and location constraints were abandoned. Planning to instruct online necessitated reconsidering our views and beliefs about MFL teaching and learning. This venture proved to be the catalyst for establishing our remote teaching courses during Trinity Term 2020 and currently remains in place.

Supported by the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), a two-hour weekly asynchronous teaching schedule was implemented through carefully

designed units of learning known as learning pathways. These focused on an interactive multimodal learning environment including discussions, grammar quizzes, and videos. This enabled students to interact with the learning content with time to reflect on their responses. Scaffolding strategies to promote interaction between students were implemented by actively engaging tutors in the process. The latter participated in personal introductions and presentations, engaged in discussions, encouraged students to pose questions, shared learning strategies and experiences, and provided timely feedback. Students were also offered a weekly 30-minute live session to further engage with their tutors and peers.

These courses were organised in a hybrid flexible model to give learners as much control over their learning process as possible and to enable them to work at their own pace and in their own time. The learning pathways focused on the activities that are normally undertaken in a face-to-face class, such as eliciting responses, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They were normally uploaded on the VLE a week in advance. Intercultural, pluricultural, and plurilingual components were incorporated thanks to the multilingual and multicultural nature of our virtual classrooms and their alignment with the European MFL teaching and learning policies. Students were encouraged to reflect on their own cultures and to compare their mother tongues or any other language they knew, with the target language. Discussion forums and questions are included in all learning pathways to encourage students to interact with their peers and tutor. Students were asked to pose questions at the end of every lesson to be answered by their tutor or, as was observed in some cases, by their peers.

3. Discussion of findings

A selection of students agreed, in writing, that their work could be reviewed over the entire process. Feedback was collected via an online survey using onlinesurveys.ac.uk, where participants were asked a variety of questions about the layout, content, and delivery of the course. Excellent feedback and results were obtained, which contributed to the expansion of the course offer, both face-

to-face and online. The quotations from students A, B, C, and D below are taken from the feedback questionnaires.

“I liked the materials and tasks quite a lot. The grammar provided a useful reminder of the use of the past tenses. The chosen media file (from RTVE) was actually quite interesting and the speaking and writing sections provided very good platform to train my language skills” (Student B).

“The modules are a good mix of short grammar lessons, quizzes, and application of the language – listening, reading, writing, responding somehow” (Student C).

This project confirmed the initial hypothesis that asynchronous teaching was a preferable method for students with different language competencies and learning styles as they were not time-bound and were able to work at their own pace. Learners had the opportunity to interact and reflect upon the authentic and contextualised input, to manipulate their output in a creative and sophisticated way without the pressure of being in an face-to-face lesson, to correct themselves, expand their lexical repertoire, and pose questions.

The analysis of the content of the learning pathways revealed the disinhibition of ‘silent learners’ in face-to-face environments. This was a rather remarkable outcome as these students felt prompted by their peers’ and tutor’s replies to contribute to discussion forums, reply with questions, and upload recordings requested in speaking activities, as attested by one participant:

“I actually like the online format because it actually required me to practice [sic] speaking much more than in the physical classroom” (Student A).

Inductive grammar exercises were praised as they encouraged students to reflect on the specific use and context of a particular grammar point before having access to the explanatory video filmed with screencast-O-matic. This approach

also contributed to the exchange of ideas and study techniques applied when learning a language in a communicative and meaningful manner.

These findings concur with those of Felix (2003) who argues that online environments facilitate a plethora of activities difficult to achieve in a physical classroom, such as:

“interpersonal communication in authentic settings, sustaining meaningful information gap activities and involving students in creating problem-based and project-based learning with a native speaker” (p. 133).

Live sessions and webinars were considered useful by the students as they gave them the opportunity to interact with peers and tutors in real-time. The topics were uploaded in advance so that the students could be prepared. The learners were also encouraged to share study techniques and tips for learning grammar and to exchange ideas about how to improve their Spanish independently.

Another relevant factor was the presence of plurilingual and pluricultural components in the lessons. Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism are considered to be effective techniques for incorporating learners’ linguistic and cultural diversity given the usual multilingual and pluricultural environment that characterises the anglophone within the higher education sector. In this case, students’ native languages and cultures were not seen as obstacles, but rather as assets in the learning process. The fact that languages other than Spanish (the target language) were given a space in the lessons was welcomed. Sharing aspects of different native or learned languages and cultures became a common practice in this virtual community.

It is also interesting to note the successful implementation of the multimodal ways of providing collective and individual feedback to students depending on the type of activity and the students’ needs. In this technology-driven teaching environment, immediate feedback was chosen for the interactive quizzes on the VLE, whereas timely feedback was used for the oral and writing activities. For

both skills, feedback was provided with a video recorded with screencast-O-matic This allowed the tutor not only to formulate constructive feedback and refer learners to different resources but also to build more personalised guidance according to learners' styles and needs:

“Cristina makes so much time to give everybody individual feedback, and I've improved incredibly rapidly in the past year because of this” (Student D).

4. Conclusions

Overall, this project supported the theory that online teaching and learning offers to both learners and language instructors a wide scope of possibilities and teaching techniques not always possible or available in in-person lessons. The VLE proved to be a useful resource where students could find all the information and resources in one place. Live sessions and webinars became the communicative microcosmos where learners could implement their MFL skills and create a virtual community with their tutor and peers. The communicative plurilingual approach contributed to the development of ‘social actors’, i.e. learners who acquire an MFL to perform in societies and cultures which differ from their own, and to develop their plurilingual awareness. Excellent results and student feedback proved to be the catalyst for establishing remote teaching during the first COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020.

This chapter has only examined the case of Spanish as a foreign language at B2, but the University of Oxford Language Centre built on this experience and offered a Spanish beginners' course in Hilary Term 2021 (January-March) to provide learners with a maximal exposure to the target language and consider all the linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Spanish was not taught in isolation as learners were invited to look for links between all the languages and cultures in the class (Auger, 2010; Byram, 2008) and to develop an awareness of how languages operate (Piccardo, 2013). English was only used as a support in the learning process instead of a medium of instruction. As Galindo Merino

(2013) asserts, if English is made the lingua franca in a multilingual classroom, especially at lower levels, students whose first language is not English could face discrimination.

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