



 Research Article

AND NOW WHAT (PART 2)? LANGUAGE TEACHING: WHAT DID WE LEARN AND WHAT REMAINS AFTER THE LOCKDOWNS?

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many aspects of life, and language learning is no exception. Lockdowns and restrictions led to digital tools such as online platforms, virtual classrooms, video conferencing, and interactive games becoming essential for language teaching. It was a difficult period for teachers and learners, however, who had to adapt overnight to a digital landscape unknown to most of them. The challenges of this period have also created the opportunity for education systems to adjust to new digital settings. This paper discusses the benefits and challenges associated with the use of digital tools in language teaching after the COVID-19 lockdowns, and especially what the teachers learned and tried to transfer after returning to a face-to-face instructional modality. The data were collected through an e-questionnaire. We sought to understand how teachers adjusted their practice, what steps they took to address knowledge gaps regarding possible digital resources, and how they transferred that knowledge to in-person classes. Teachers experienced many difficulties and doubts about resources, methods, and learning outcomes, particularly about students' learning of foreign language communication skills. We also noticed that only half of them tried to continue using digital tools in their teaching practice after the lockdowns ended.

KEYWORDS

Second language, COVID-19, consequences, educational technology, teaching methods, university education.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns have had a profound impact on education across the

world. A range of digital tools had to be adopted to facilitate the continuation of learning during this time.

This has had particular implications for language classes, as many aspects of language instruction rely heavily on the use of interactive tools (Ferri et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Ribeiro, 2020). The post-COVID-19 challenge is to determine how to take advantage of the learning achieved during that period to try to continue using digital tools in the classroom and, thus, enrich our pedagogical practices (Ferri et al., 2020; Fuchs, 2021; Hodges et al., 2021).

As previously stated, (Guerra, 2023), the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) resulted in the widespread use of digital applications by students and teachers, who were largely unfamiliar with them. Schools were compelled to close their doors due to social distancing measures, forcing a disruption in traditional teaching methods. The primary objective was to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning while ensuring the safety of all individuals involved. As Payne (2020) mentioned “transitioning to teaching fully online requires reimagining how to help students achieve the learning outcomes you have set for them under a different configuration of capabilities and constraints” (p. 247). The transition from face-to-face instruction to a screen-mediated environment introduced various external factors (e.g., internet connectivity) and internal factors (e.g., digital competence and access to resources) that created difficulties for the task of teaching and learning; some of these difficulties were related to an effort to deliver online what teachers and students were used to do in person (e.g., Mohammed et al., 2020).

Universities attempted to provide digital competence training for teachers, but the sudden shift made systematic coaching nearly impossible. The trainings were therefore organized based on immediate needs, resulting in the implementation of new technologies

without thorough preparation. This led to the emergence of a diverse range of digital applications in the teaching and learning process, which added complexity to instructional planning. Students and teachers had to develop new skills to adapt to the circumstances, including problem-solving, navigating unfamiliar online resources, and exploiting new technologies. While the variety of digital resources was seen as an advantage for online education, the focus is now shifting towards a post-COVID-19 scenario and the application of lessons learned from digital language teaching. It is important not to revert to pre-pandemic practices, but instead to integrate the acquired digital knowledge into in-person teaching, creating dynamic and interactive learning experiences that align with students’ digital lives. Some institutions and teachers remain hesitant about incorporating the knowledge gained during lockdowns into planning lessons in multimodal learning ecosystems, while others are embracing the change and adopting a rich learning ecosystem that offers flexibility, access, continuity, and resilience (Moore et al., 2021). The growth of active learning pedagogy, particularly in higher education, has contributed to the increased use of technology-enhanced education, improving student participation and learning outcomes. However, it is crucial to adapt these approaches to both ERT and face-to-face teaching situations (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Guppy et al., 2022; Lassoued et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021). Therefore, this research sought to determine if language teachers at the researcher’s institution are continuing to use digital resources in face-to-face classes and whether they considered their teaching practice to have changed during the pandemic period. Biographical and academic data were analyzed in another paper, as were the challenges imposed by the confinements (Guerra, 2023). This paper presents the challenges and opportunities of the return to face-to-face teaching

and what is prevalent in the use of technologies in the classroom.

Methodology

The data were obtained through an e-survey¹, to which 16 language teachers from the researcher's home institution responded, 2 of whom are male. The vast majority (n=10) are over 50 years old, which reveals a certain aging of the university teaching class. Among the respondents, 10 hold a PhD, and 6 a master's degree; 10 of them have attended a teacher training course.²

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We looked at the challenges of ERT at an earlier point (Guerra, 2023). As might be expected, the difficulties were not unlike those reported by other investigations in diverse scientific areas, geographies, and even levels of education. Respondents found the transition to ERT extremely challenging, with repercussions on their teaching practices that included experiencing difficulties in adapting materials, stimulating student participation (particularly oral competence), and, above all, the loss of control during evaluation and lesson conduct. What was strange at the time was the fact that they did not highlight their own or their students' lack of digital skills. This is probably explained by the fact that most of the teachers stated that they were already using digital resources before the lockdowns (Table 1).

Table 1. Did you already use digital tools before remote teaching?

Yes	13 (81.3%)
No	3 (18.8%)
Total	16 (100%)

Based on their answers³, teachers already used online platforms with digital content (e.g., Moodle), web pages that allow the creation of quizzes for instance (e.g., Kahoot, Google Form, Mentimeter), or more traditional tools such as access to videos (e.g., YouTube) or authentic documents (newspaper pages or others) before the lockdowns. Nevertheless, nine respondents reported having attended training

courses on adapting teaching practice to ERT (Table 2). The University promoted courses so that teachers could become familiar with the available tools (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams), how to take advantage of the different features of Moodle (i.e., regarding the creation of evaluation tests), and about active methodologies for ERT.

¹ A print version of the e-survey can be consulted at [pos-remote class study questionnaire - Google Forms - cópia.pdf](#) (please note that the questionnaire is in Portuguese).

² More details about the e-survey construction and social, demographic, and academic background can be found in Guerra (2023).

³ The answers to the open-ended questions can be found in the following document online: [Respostas Obtidas às Questões Abertas.pdf](#) (please note that they are written in Portuguese and Galician).

Table 2. Have you attended any training to adapt your practice to distance language learning?

Yes	9 (56.3%)
No	7 (43.8%)
Total	16 (100%)

The answers obtained to question 15 confirm their participation in these trainings, which were mainly related to the use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Mentimeter, and Moodle. The teachers were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the ERT (Question 16 – Q16). Two of them preferred not to comment⁴ and three chose to mention only that it allowed the continuity of the classes; by avoiding travel, students were also more assiduous (they missed fewer classes and were rarely late). One of the respondents added that it allowed them to attend classes even if they were sick. Therefore, for this group of teachers, the main strength was essentially the attendance criterion and not in changing or adapting teaching practices as the others did. In fact, most of them highlighted the incorporation of digital resources and their positive effect on student motivation, even though, as one of the teachers said, “in practice they were similar to traditional activities that were carried out in paper format.”⁵ Teachers mentioned that the virtual classes allowed them to manage student participation and that they felt more motivated in the oral production activities. The fact of being constantly online (and probably having a small group of students) allowed one of them to organize more frequent personalized consultations to clarify doubts. It is also worth noting the opinion of one of the teachers that there were differences between the two years of confinement. In 2020, the first year, the students were

more concentrated and were more assiduous. In the second (2021), these behaviors did not occur. In the first confinement, everyone was a little lost about how to act and did not really know how to proceed and behave. The teachers tried to find ways to adapt their lessons to the ERT and the students tried to understand how to follow the lessons, do activities, or complete assessments. In this context, it is understandable why one of the respondents stated that, “I don’t think of this case, and I don’t feel comfortable evaluating it. I think it was emergency teaching that had to be at a distance, and I opine that it was just different.”⁶

The challenges mentioned by the respondents (Question 17 – Q17) are in line with those found in other research in the area (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Brown et al., 2022; Ferri et al., 2020; Fuchs, 2021; Lassoued et al., 2020; Mohammed et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2021; Moser et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2021). Indeed, the responses obtained can be grouped into six major categories. The first relates to teachers’ lack of preparation for ERT. The abrupt move to remote teaching created challenges associated with planning, lesson organization, and the construction of appropriate teaching materials. Such preparation required time, which is precisely what the teachers did not have, as well as pedagogical knowledge related to techniques, digital tools, and design for computer-

⁴ This situation was recurrent afterwards in all open questions. They only marked “nothing to declare” or “not applicable.”

⁵ (pese a que na prática fosen moi semellantes ás actividades tradicionais que realizaban na aula en formato papel).

⁶ Não me ocorrem neste caso e não me sinto à vontade para o avaliar. Penso que foi um ensino de emergência que teve de ser à distância e opino que foi simplesmente diferente.

assisted language learning (CALL), which has undergone a major evolution since the beginning of the century. One respondent added that “the forced transposition to online was sometimes disappointing because it was just a face-to-face class but online.”⁷ Concomitantly, it is understandable that the second major concern was the management of students’ work in the virtual space and, especially, oral participation. Testimonies such as “the fact that it is not possible to have juxtaposition of interventions, which makes the dialogue not very fluid,”⁸ or “The lack of face-to-face contact motivated the loss of cohesion in the class (at least in those groups from the first years during the pandemic). In foreign language classes it is, I think, necessary that the atmosphere is relaxed so that the students feel at ease to speak. For me, it was a challenge to create an atmosphere of confidence and security in the class with students whom I had never personally seen and who also didn’t know each other.”⁹ The teachers associated it with a third challenge: motivating distance students, many in the university system for the first time, without knowing their classmates face-to-face, and used to using digital communication tools in other contexts. Thus, as one of the respondents noted, “Maintaining the concentration of the group. Interacting through a screen and in a space that does not associate with the classes, I think led them to lose concentration and motivation.”¹⁰ The absence of body language was another concern for the respondents. In fact, two of them mentioned that not having face-to-face contact made it difficult to maintain a space of trust and safety,

as mentioned above, and, especially, to provide feedback on learning, which often manifested by the student’s body and facial expression. The screen-mediated classes were, far too often, blank, with no cameras on and no faces to watch during the class (cf. David & Tellier, 2021). Two respondents emphasized the reliability of the assessment and the control of fraud, which were also recurring concerns in similar studies. As they were not in the same room, there was some doubt about how to ensure the authorship of the answers given by a student in an assessment test or in the production of a text.

Finally, the sixth concern related to the technical problems experienced by the teacher and the students. Some of them did not have access to a computer at home, and, at first, they attended classes through their mobile phone or through the computer of another person with whom they lived. The Institution organized and prepared rooms in which those students could follow the classes through computers provided by the University. The Government also provided some measures of support. The authorized digital resources required deeper knowledge from the teachers to take advantage of all of the available resources, and the students themselves did not know how to use some of them. The Institution studied here did, however, provide trainings to support teachers and the computer services were available to help the academic community to be able to teach/participate in classes.

⁷ A transposição forçada para o online foi, por vezes, uma desilusão por ser apenas uma aula presencial mas online.

⁸ [...] o facto de não ser possível ter justaposição de intervenções, o que torna o diálogo pouco fluído; [...]

⁹ A falta de contacto presencial motivou a perda de cohesión na turma (pelo menos naqueles grupos que cursaron os primeiros anos durante a pandemia). Nas aulas de linguas estranxeiras é,

acho, necesario que o ambiente sexa distendido para que os alumnos se sintan á vontade para falar. Para min foi un desafío crear un ambiente de confianza e seguridade na aula con alumnos aos que nunca vira persoalmente e que tampouco eles se coñecían.

¹⁰ Manter a concentración do alunado. Interactuar a través dunha pantalla e nun espazo que non asociar coas aulas acho que os levou a perder concentración e motivación.

Concerning the opportunities of ERT (Question 18 – Q18), the teachers highlighted (self-)training, having learned more about the digital resources available, and stimulating self-learning (of students, but also of teachers). The use of technologies in remote classes made it possible to diversify the methodologies and resources, which helped to motivate the students. Finally, the respondents again mentioned that ERT allowed the continuity of the classes and the ability to reach a larger and more diverse number of people because there was no need to go to campus.

Finally, at the end of the lockdown period, what prevailed in teaching practice? The answers obtained to Question 19 (Q19) revealed two types of behavior: almost half of the respondents maintained the resources used before the pandemic (e.g., YouTube, Moodle, and quizzes) and those who enriched their teaching practice using digital instruments that they had come into contact with in the training courses or research carried out autonomously (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Mentimeter, Microsoft Office online/Google Drive). According to respondents (Question 20 – Q20), the use of such tools makes classes more dynamic, collaborative, and motivating, replacing paper and traditional activities (e.g., gap-fill exercises) with digital activities, and using communication tools (i.e., Zoom) to reach students who, for various reasons, do not attend classes, cannot be in their tutorial classes, or are unable meet the teacher in person during office hours. Some teachers mentioned these tools as useful for meetings with trainees as well.

It is emphasized that during the lockdowns, the teachers, formally or informally, updated pedagogical and content knowledge (cf. Schön, 1983; Shulman, 1986). First, they got to know or adapted teaching and

learning methodologies to go beyond the transposition of their face-to-face lessons to a remote environment. Through such activities, and with the contribution of the digital resources used, they intend to capture the student attention, maintain learner motivation, promote oral participation, and enhance the development of foreign language skills (listening, speaking, writing, reading, and mediation) along with grammatical knowledge.

The fact that some of the respondents mention it themselves in several of the questions allows us to deduce that the methodology of these teachers will have undergone changes that we think will be maintained and will thus be more linked to the daily practice of their students regarding the use of digital tools in the social or personal, but also in the educational, domain.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Digital tools have proven to be incredibly useful in the virtual language classroom. Students are able to access a range of online resources that can bolster their knowledge and skills. Video conferencing services such as Zoom and Google Meet allow for easier communication between teachers and students, while various online platforms, such as Moodle or Google Classroom, can provide a helpful space for students to complete tasks and submit assignments. Digital tools have been used to facilitate practical language learning, with a range of successful applications, from practicing pronunciation through voice and video recordings to sharing multimedia materials between students and instructors. While digital tools can be effective for the overall management of a virtual language classroom, they do not always succeed in engaging students, as mentioned by the respondents. Students can often become frustrated when technology fails to meet their expectations,

particularly when language instruction requires an interactive experience. If students are not properly engaged and motivated, their learning outcomes may suffer.

Teachers felt problems not only at the technical level (e.g., associated with the equipment used, internet connection), but also regarding the skills and knowledge needed to, for example, adapt and create materials for digital environments, use possible digital resources, and maintain students' motivation and participation. Yet, as stated by González et al. (2023), "despite the problems faced due to the disruption caused by the pandemic, several lessons were learned: Teachers employed an array of digital tools to maintain content delivery and promote interaction, deepened their understanding of course design and assessment, and developed an empathic disposition to understand student's situations" (p. 55).

It was very clear that digital tools have been incredibly useful for the running of language classes during the pandemic lockdowns. However, if educational institutions are to maximize student engagement and the quality of learning outcomes, it is essential to invest in language-specific tools and regular teacher training. By providing a more engaging and interactive experience, students can become more motivated and increase their language proficiency. At the same time, teachers should continue learning about digital tools, trying to combine, in the future, the two experienced realities: digital and face-to-face. We therefore considered it relevant that at least half of the respondents stated that they have continued to use digital tools, including them in their daily practice, and the fact that they considered that their teaching practice has changed. Language teachers have shown resilience and flexibility in adapting to online teaching, but it seems that, for the most part, educational

systems live in a digital contemporaneity, crossing it with analog solutions (perpetuating analog practices of action) in teaching practices, but referring to them as ruptures with traditional practices.

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