

LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN THE DIGITAL AGE IN PORTUGAL, AND THE PROBLEMATICS OF SKILLS FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The teaching/learning of foreign languages (FL) in Higher Education (HE) has undergone a huge evolution due to the constant need for innovation and adaptation to the current contexts of globalization and rapid technological progress. The demands of society and the job market require one to rethink the skills to be developed during academic training and the role and practices of teachers. The position of students as active actors in the teaching-learning process needs to be reviewed, followed by a readjustment of the interactions between those involved.

FL plays a fundamental role in the internationalization of HE and in preparing students to take on the responsibilities of 21st century citizens and highly qualified and competent professionals. As it is well known today, teaching a language is not just about developing vocabulary: it must enable the acquisition of various other skills, particularly in terms of intercultural communication, which is crucial for keeping up with new economic and social challenges.

In this context, this article aims to highlight the path taken in the curricular units (CU) of FL at the School of Education (ESEV) of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (IPV) (Portugal) in the undergraduate Media Studies course, based on the various projects implemented in an articulated manner and developed by international and multidisciplinary teams with the support of the Center for Studies in Education and Innovation of the aforementioned Institution. The LEE project highlights the needs of companies/businesses in the Viseu region in terms of FL, as well as professional development based on FL practice. The JASM project shows how to combine learning FL for specific purposes, through projects, with digital tools. The APSASeG project also focuses on active FL learning in HE with the gamification of teaching based on serious games.

In addition to a reflection on the conclusions of each project in terms of learning practices, we discuss the key competences to be worked on with the students at issue, the evolution of these competences considering the rapid progress of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the best way to deepen and enhance competences associated with those inherent in FL learning. The conclusion is in line with recent European recommendations, in terms of FL practice, for the development of multicultural and intercultural competences.

Keywords: Foreign language competences and the labour market, Project based learning, FL learning and gamification, intercultural competences.

1 INTRODUCTION

The priorities of pedagogical innovation in HE are to adjust classroom learning as closely as possible to current day's world reality in a motivating way, in order to train responsible and active citizens and competitive professionals. The relationship between HE and FL learning, innovative practices and the training of the various profiles has become easier, but also more complex, due to the use of digital tools, another of the challenges to be dealt with so as to meet the demands posed in the 21st century in working with generation Z.

The internationalization of HE, a clear consequence of the implementation of the Bologna process, the diversification and acceleration of mobility and globalization, has created an extraordinary platform for exchanges, scientific, linguistic and cultural enrichment, among others [1]. In this context, FL play a fundamental role in the process of preparing students for society and the job market in terms of various skills: knowing how to be, knowing how to do, knowing how to learn and knowing how to act [2].

Multilingualism and multiculturalism have always been a concern for Europe. The Commission of the European Communities' Strategic Framework for Multilingualism [3] stresses that the economic competitiveness of companies depends on the integration of employees with linguistic and intercultural

skills in their areas of specialization. It refers to the whole of European society and advocates the practice of at least 2 European languages in addition to the mother tongue. English is recognized as the most widely used language in business. However, the ELAN project [4] showed that European companies were missing out on many opportunities due to a lack of command of the languages practiced by potential clients, including regional languages and customs.

In the context of Industry 4.0, the labor market has been undergoing rapid evolution, with new economic and social challenges [5]. As a result, the skills sought by recruiters have changed accordingly; the already well-known *hard skills* have since been joined by *soft skills* and, recently, *mad skills*, with diversity and increasingly detailed definitions, which shows a concern to favor very specific and unusual professional profiles.

Taking all these assumptions into account, this article aims to highlight the work done to adapt the teaching/learning of FL in the BA degree in Media Studies at ESEV to the vicissitudes of the current job market, essentially in terms of deepening the various skills to be worked on with students, based on an experimental path made possible by the implementation over time of different projects inside and outside the classroom, designed and developed by international and multidisciplinary teams.

2 THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND EMPLOYABILITY (LEE) PROJECT

In 2003, the European Commission's Green Paper on "Entrepreneurship in Europe" [6] warned of the need to close loopholes that weaken the labor market. One of the barriers preventing the exploitation of international opportunities and an effective response to the challenges of competition is precisely language.

The LEE project (PROJ/CI&DETS/CGD/0016) [7] ran from January 2017 to January 2019. Its main objective was to help improve the employability of ESEV graduates by reflecting on the FL needs of companies in Viseu (Portugal) and its district. It led to the confirmation of a need for a reinforcement of the professionalizing nature of the path underlying FL teaching/learning. The project was also an opportunity to raise awareness in the community of the importance of FL for a successful career. Twelve companies responded to an *online* survey and 180 job offers were analyzed. 41% of these vacancies in a wide range of economic sectors required FL skills in several languages, not just English.

The LEE project concluded that there is a close link between written and oral skills in the language and job opportunities, better pay and career progression, with easier access to positions with more responsibility. Proficiency in several languages is clearly highly valued, making the difference at the recruitment stage. The demands on employees' language skills increase with the levels of qualification and experience required.

Having certain communication skills (including language skills), as well as having international work experience, are factors that can help employers infer other types of skills, such as adaptability, curiosity, empathy, ease and flexibility in interpersonal relationships, all of which have positive repercussions in terms of personal and professional development.

3 A QUESTION OF SKILLS

In the *World Economic Forum* report, Schwab and Zahidi [8] predict that in 2025 the job market will demand twelve *soft skills* from its employees. These include communication, flexibility, adaptability, critical thinking, teamwork, active learning strategies, creativity and originality, and problem-solving skills. With the ultra-fast advances in technology, especially in the area of artificial intelligence (AI), new skills are emerging [9].

The fact that *soft skills* are highly valued cannot devalue the importance of *hard skills*, as both naturally complement each other, interacting for mutual improvement. *Mad skills*, which refer to the exceptional, atypical competencies of the individual, are currently highly sought after in the job market, as a guarantee of a profile that stands out from the rest in the fields of innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, among others [10]. Depending on the context, various skills can move from one category to another. In addition to mutual influences, they are often intertwined, with no clear boundaries [11]. Each professional must demonstrate a harmonious combination of these various skills.

Communication is an interesting case in point. Verbal and non-verbal, oral and written, communication the cornerstone of human relations, has its own rules and cannot be considered just as a transversal or behavioral competence; rather, we should ask ourselves about its increasingly exceptional character in

the context of AI. This is a good example of the great complexity of defining and categorizing competences. The study by Scudder and Guinan [12] concluded that adequate communication skills and positive perceptions of professional performance are closely linked. Several more recent studies continue to demonstrate the great influence of communication skills on successful professional performance, such as the case of leaders in motivating and engaging their employees [13].

Lack of awareness of this reality may help to explain the often-inappropriate treatment given to FL in HE in Portugal. We therefore propose to summarize the competences worked on at this level in the UC in question.

3.1 FL skills

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [14] presents six reference levels for competences in the FL, in the domains of comprehension (oral and written), oral expression (interaction and production) and writing. In the descriptors, the CEFR distinguishes between general competences (knowing, doing, being, learning), communicative competences (in the areas of linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics), communicative language activities and strategies (reception, production, interaction and mediation).

The updated version of the CEFR [15] presents more detailed communicative activities. In terms of competences, in addition to plurilingual and pluricultural competence, the categories of communicative competence are linguistic competence (with assessment of the length of the lexicon, for example, and mastery of vocabulary, phonology and spelling), sociolinguistic competence (with only sociolinguistic appropriateness) and pragmatic competence (flexibility, turn-taking, thematic development, coherence and cohesion, precision, ease). The complementary and individual descriptors take into account situations of online interaction, the establishment of a multicultural space, the facilitation of communication in more delicate or conflictual situations and the adaptation of the level of discourse.

With the emergence of digital tools and the needs of the global village, this benchmark, despite being widely used in several countries, has tended to lose interest in the search for learning effectiveness [16]. The debate about the CEFR's approach to plurilingual and pluricultural competence [17] in a society characterized by its linguistic and cultural diversity and richness also demonstrates its limitations, particularly with regard to the practical assessment of these same competences [18].

This being the case, combining the learning of the various competences in FL courses with non-specific language courses is a recurring concern. It should be noted that the intercultural approach integrated into communicative needs in FL for specific purposes, in addition to being a practice that should become increasingly common for the social reasons already mentioned, seems to have a positive impact on students' motivation and their search for diversification in terms of communicative skills [19].

3.2 Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Intercultural communication (IC) occurs when interlocutors from different cultures interact in a verbal and/or non-verbal communicative process, a potential source of alteration in the perception of the intended information [20]. In 1997, Byram [21] proposed a model of CCI that is still used today, based on five skills: knowledge (*savoirs*), intercultural attitudes (*savoir-être*), interpretation and relationship skills (*savoir-comprendre*), discovery and interaction skills (*savoir-apprendre*, *savoir-faire*) and critical cultural awareness (*savoir-s'engager*). These skills are interconnected and in perfect harmony with the competences described in the CEFR [22].

In their IC model, Defleur and Ball-Rokeach [23] introduce the notion of noise, which refers to any disturbance during the communicative act, preventing effective communication. The message is encoded by the transmitter and decoded by the receiver, each applying their own psychological and cultural filters in a cybernetic-based model. Language and cultural/intercultural barriers and fear of the Other clearly constitute noise, in that they lead to misunderstandings, discomfort and other factors [24]. According to this author, the various participants in the communicative act must demonstrate culture and media literacy to ensure effective communication.

Chen and Starosta's [25] ICC model explains the role of cognitive skills (knowledge of one's own culture, the culture of the Other, and awareness of the communicative elements involved), emotional skills (self-control of negative emotions in favor of positive emotional responses) and behavioral skills (appropriate to the contextual reality, through appropriate communication). Therefore, in addition to linguistic knowledge *per se*, issues such as working on stereotypes and abusive generalizations, knowledge of cultures, including one's own, awareness of otherness, among others, are essential tasks for the successful learning of FL and their underlying cultures.

The use of digital tools in the classroom, in the profession and in life in general has introduced a new paradigm in the teaching/learning process, creating new opportunities for openness, the discovery of otherness, the diversification of teaching practices, autonomy, motivation, lifelong learning and the transfer of knowledge, among others.

The following projects were based on this set of findings, contributions to reflection on the teaching/learning process of FL at HE, in courses where FL is not a core subject.

4 THE OPEN WINDOW ONTO THE WORLD PROJECT: FL, MULTIMODAL CREATIVITY AND PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION (JASM)

St-Jean and Dupuis Brouillette [26] show that, thanks to pedagogical activation, students are effectively involved in their learning, progressing thanks to their ideas and their implementation. In project-based learning, the student invests in the development of a project, a dynamic strategy that requires collaborative work, the use of technologies and the creation of artifacts. The teacher's role is merely to support learning.

The JASM project ((PROJ/IPV/ID&I/030) consisted of an active pedagogy experience with students from ESEV's Media Studies degree program in 2019-20 and 2020-21. Promoting the acquisition of multilingual and multicultural skills and awakening multilingual awareness were the main objectives.

The students had the opportunity to explore the cognitive, aesthetic and emotional dimensions of language. Based on the collection of information about the cultural and linguistic diversity of the city of Viseu, multimodal communication in French and English was boosted by experiences of artistic creativity (*media arts*, multimedia art, among others). The students were involved in collaborative group work and began the project with research into the countries of origin of the chosen nationalities and their respective cultures. They then drew upon the life stories of the selected migrants based on the interviews conducted. They also built a fictional story around an object or tradition evoked in the stories told by the migrants. A *storyboard* of each fiction was created using the photographs taken during the various stages of the work. The Korsakow system enabled the creation of dynamic documentaries.

The whole learning experience (including the teachers' involvement) was presented regularly during lessons with the aim of sharing knowledge, findings difficulties and good practices. The students' language level in both languages (written and oral comprehension and expression) was assessed at the beginning of the project through tests. The intermediate and final assessment was qualitative (interviews with students and teachers). The cultural and intercultural dimension (with reference to Portuguese culture) was assessed through the texts produced and interventions in the classroom. The external community was also involved thanks to an exhibition, the website, meetings... [27].

The project reinforced the students' curiosity, motivation, enthusiasm, creativity and autonomy, enabling language development, multicultural communication, autonomous learning and the acquisition of collaborative skills, as well as transversal skills characteristic of the course area in question, particularly digital skills. It thus responds to the needs described by the *World Economic Forum* [8]. From the point of view of the teachers involved, the experience provided motivation and satisfaction. It also enabled them to acquire skills with new digital platforms and to work as a team with colleagues from other scientific fields. In this sense, the teacher's role resembled that of a mentor, taking on other attitudes and concerns and showing greater availability and flexibility.

5 AN ACTIVE FL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Building on the conclusions of previous projects, in 2021-22 we conducted another project-based learning experience using digital tools that are easily available in the classroom (*android* devices, *tablet* and computer), involving students from ESEV's Media Studies Bachelor's degree so that they could acquire skills in French and English for specific purposes [28].

The students worked in small, heterogeneous groups on a free-choice project in both languages, using strategies and skills pertaining to their forthcoming professional field (e.g. interview, report...). All the productions were published on social media accounts. The whole process followed strict organizational criteria from the outset, essentially with regard to the pace of work, the timetable and assessment, establishing a culture of sharing, self-assessment and constructive criticism. It also implied the

acquisition of a form of autonomy that is vital for the successful completion of tasks. The Moodle platform proved to be a fundamental tool for sharing information and work before it was disseminated.

As far as the quantitative results of the course in question are concerned, it was found that the level of literacy of all the students increased by one grade, both in writing and speaking. Regarding the monitoring of the activities and the qualitative evaluation carried out throughout and at the end of the semester, through conversations based on free questions and comments, it can be said that the students appreciated the freedom to choose the project topic and the design of the course. They recognized that they had gained autonomy and were more comfortable communicating in the language. The session on photography offered by an expert was considered beneficial and the teachers' suggestions for follow-up, reorientation and correction were seen as very useful. However, they admitted that they found it difficult to take advantage of all the benefits of autonomy, even taking into account the collaborative nature of the work, due to the lack of innovative ideas and creativity at the various stages of the process.

Taking on the role of supervisors required teachers to master new strategies, have excellent knowledge of the nature of the course in question and its characteristics, flexibility, immediate adaptability, increased availability even outside the classroom, help with guidance in problem situations and the ability to offer different types of support even beyond the scope of the FL. As this type of support is much more demanding and rigorous than preparing lessons using a traditional methodology, it is also much more rewarding in terms of the learning environment both inside and outside the classroom. The teachers familiarized themselves with digital tools, immediately identifying the ones easiest to manage in the school context: the *smartphone* and sporadic use of the computer. To encourage more creativity, they gave examples of good practice.

The results of current research tend to show that the use of active learning methodologies in a collaborative work context, as opposed to traditional strategies, promotes the interactive process between students and between students and teachers, student interest and facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the language. The students, nevertheless, were shown to have had difficulties with creativity and critical thinking.

As digital skills are becoming increasingly essential, they should naturally be integrated into teaching practices, regardless of the area in question. In this context, gamification poses new challenges and offers promising prospects, even though there is still a lot of work to be done in this area.

6 THE PROJECT OPENING THE CLASSROOM DOORS: SERIOUS GAMES- THE IMPACT OF GAMIFICATION ON FL TEACHING/LEARNING IN HE (APSASEG) LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Rezende and Mesquita [29] define gamification as "the use of game elements, strategies and thoughts outside of a *game*" (non-game environment) (p. 1004). In addition to the motivational aspect, the game has advantages such as cognitive development, the simultaneous stimulation of interactions, cooperation and collaboration between players and the representation of abstract concepts and/or situations in a virtual space ([30]; [31]). A *serious game* combines the "*seriousness*" of a pedagogical scenario with the playful aspects of a video *game* [32].

In order to have an impact on learning, the game must be an activity that fits in well with the training context and the profile of the students, promoting the acquisition of skills by the user [33]. The conclusions of the study by Ahmed et al. [34] show that game-based learning can produce better results than learning through traditional methods, allowing it to continue beyond the classroom context.

From the point of view of teaching practices, education 3.0 is a commitment to better respond to the need for innovation, updating and experimentation with new strategies that are more appealing to generation Z, promoting spaces for dialog, reasoning and reflection [35]. The role of the teacher as a companion, facilitator and observer of the various phases of the game and its application is paramount. By aiming to innovate pedagogically, the game enriches the learning environment through active methodologies [36]. Therefore, according to Casañ-Pitarch [37], *video games* based on *storylines* can be perfectly integrated into standard classroom practices.

The APSASeG project (PROJ/I&DI/CI&DEI/009) began in October 2022, with the aim of improving student *performance* by integrating gamified digital activities into FL learning on a non-specific language higher education course; evaluating the effects of gamification in terms of the skills acquired by students (in FL and transversal), with a view to promoting employability; to observe the evolution of relationships

between the actors in the teaching/learning process (teachers and students); to portray teaching practices and consequent adaptations to the role and behavior of teachers; to survey the advantages and disadvantages of gamification, as well as the problems encountered during the implementation of this active methodology; and to design and evaluate a *serious game* for this level of education, based on the observations made.

The target audience is a group of students from ESEV's Media Studies degree course. The expected results are an increase in linguistic *performance* thanks to better commitment, greater motivation and curiosity; the promotion of diverse skills, particularly in terms of communication, in writing and orally; the development of autonomy, creativity, reasoning, a critical eye and greater responsibility in the learning process; the renewal of teaching practices conducive to student motivation; a contribution to the production of knowledge for distance and collaborative learning; and the production of teaching material and its dissemination.

A pre-experiment led to the conclusion that students are enthusiastic about using *serious games* as a teaching/learning tool for ESL, highlighting increased curiosity, motivation and collaborative work as beneficial factors to take into account throughout the process.

7 CONCLUSION

With rapid social change, professional demands and AI, teaching/learning practices in HE must innovate in order to bring students' interests ever closer to the realities of society and the economy. FLs play a crucial role in preparing responsible citizens, competitive professionals with high-performance communication skills and diverse abilities.

The various projects carried out at IPV/ ESEV with students on a non-FL course have made it possible to adapt teaching practices to these realities. The diversification of methodologies (active pedagogy, interdisciplinarity, mobilization of transversal skills, etc.) and the digital tools used have forced teachers and students to completely revise their work strategies. The advantages are clear: openness to the world, diversification of content and media, motivation, interest, autonomy, creativity, critical thinking, etc. The difficulties lie in the lack of technological training offered/available for teachers and the resistance of some students who feel uncomfortable about models implemented which are not traditional.

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