PARTNER FOR CULTURAL EXCHANGE PROJECT: THE SEQUEL

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ABSTRACT

The unparalleled consequences since the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted various sectors of society, including equity-minded learners' services, online class delivery, in-service professional development, basic needs, and psychological services. Some of the challenges that have forever impacted academia are addressed in this cultural project that focus on increasing oral language practice and cultural exchange for the switch from face to face to online teaching. The *Projeto Parceiro para Intercâmbio Cultural* (PPIC) promotes intercultural practice among higher education learners of Portuguese as Second and First languages from the United States and Brazil, respectively. The project aligns Learning Outcomes (LO) with tools, strategies of delivery, and assessment to enhance quality of teaching and learning experiences. It associates Bloom's Taxonomy with the Project-Based Learning framework to prepare Learning Objective (LO) and Quality Learning and Teaching (QLT) Instrument. The application of Backward Design allows the correct alignment of the process and can be verified in the course map. The project consists of a series of interactions based on pre-set topics recorded in Zoom© meetings. Participants prepare questions as guidelines to interactions and insert organically aspects of personal interest to their conversations.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; online teaching; portuguese; project-based learning; second-language acquisition.

RESUMO

Sentem-se consequências sem precedentes da pandemia da COVID-19 em muitos setores da sociedade, incluindo serviços para equidade de discentes, aulas *online*, treinamentos de docentes, necessidades básicas e serviços de apoio psicológico. Alguns desafios que têm impactado o mundo acadêmico são tratados neste projeto de intercâmbio cultural, desenvolvido em razão da súbita mudança do formato presencial para o remoto. O Projeto Parceiro para Intercâmbio Cultural (PPIC) promove conversações entre estudantes universitários da California State University, Stanislaus, Estados Unidos, em aprendizado de Português e estudantes em Projeto de Extensão da PUC Minas, Brasil. O projeto alinha resultados de aprendizado com ferramentas, estratégias de ensino e avaliações na otimização do processo ensino-aprendizagem e, para isso, associa a Taxonomia de Bloom à teoria de Aprendizagem Baseada em Projetos; a abordagem do currículo invertido permite tal alinhamento, que pode ser verificado no mapa de curso. O PPIC consiste em uma série de interações pautadas em tópicos que incluem conceitos como os de ética e cidadania, dentre outros - e são gravadas pelo Zoom©. Os participantes preparam questões como guia para as interações e inserem organicamente aspectos de interesse próprio nas conversas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: COVID-19; ensino on-line; Português; aprendizagem baseada em projetos; aquisição de segunda língua.

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Approaching the aftermath of Covid 19 might sound untimely anywhere in the world just yet. For the most, the educational setting has received such an impact that one can foresee many consequences for the next decades in multiple aspects of our systems: ways to deliver products and services, for example, have been shaped to new demands of a population that still feels insecure about many aspects of the future, to say the least.

While some scholars (GACS; GOERTLER; SPASOVA, 2020) have suggested that, given the circumstances and the timeframes for crisis online teaching, quality expectations are likely to be lowered especially when testing security, technological sophistication, accessibility, copyright, and learning outcomes, other researchers (CÁRDENAS; NIETO-CRUZ; MARTÍNEZ, 2021; RITONGA *et al.*, 2021) advocate for a smooth adaptation thanks to the digital era we live in. Consequently, this leads to a myriad of problems in Portuguese Foreign Language Education as well. Da Silva Fernandes (2021) explains that while COVID-19 has made minorities even more vulnerable with race and gender biases, educators are compelled to move due to inequities, and foreign language education settings welcome power structure and equity questioning. After all, a latent agency is the channel to promote social change locally and globally.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the trajectory of teaching and learning has been changed the face of most educational systems throughout the world. Educators' mind setting has switched to adequately adapt to new realities of what one once knew of classroom interactions. The traditional way to deliver face-to-face education was no longer a possibility, and uncertainties about when that shift would return to what it used to be – if ever possible – generated a lot of stress and expectations. On the other hand, new opportunities challenged professionals on how to deal with education in remote formats while away from traditional classroom settings. From the creation of new programs, syllabi, learning management systems (Canvas© and Moodle©, for example), practice activities, assessment, evidence collection, and the consequences of over usage of some tools kept bringing new challenges and generating more anxiety.

Anxiety is defined as the anticipation of uneasiness, as it prepares the individual for the fear of a negative evaluation. Rachman (2013, p. 3) relates anxiety with fear, as the two terms are used interchangeably.

> A tense unsettling anticipation of a threatening but form-less event; a feeling of uneasy suspense Nonetheless, differently than fear, which is a response to an emergency, anxiety can last for days, weeks, or months, and the source of threat for anxiety is elusive.

1 BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Previous studies in foreign language (FL) education have considered language anxiety as a factor in foreign acquisition (DA SILVA, 2020). Our basilar scholars, Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), in their seminal study, propose that foreign language anxiety is frequently responsible for learners' unease in the foreign language classroom. We debate that the perception of media is not always based on objective cues, but on subjectively shapes of formality. The mere presence of the teacher may signal both hierarchy and assessment, consequently, *Zoom*© *fatigue*.

Guillén, Sawin & Avineri (2020) elaborate on the neologism *Zoom*© *fatigue* by signalizing that digitally mediated language instruction may involuntarily focus on what is missed or lacking instead of the strengths of the learning opportunity. Given that, we have verified that even though a regular classroom literally embodies the so-called three-dimensional interaction, where everyone needs to be showing engagement all the time, it is the videoconferencing teaching tool reality that can make *both learner and instructor* feel cornered and intimidated. The minimum lapse will not go unnoticed as if the environment counted on a highly efficient unintegration detector. Oddly enough, it is mobile-assisted instruction environment that challenges the core role of the Internet: bringing new settings closer together, not the face-to-face one.

These new settings included both physical and virtual spaces once offices became part of the household. Headsets and special camera lights were necessary accessories to provide good sound and image, and good Internet connection, large bandwidth, syllabi, and data plans on cellphones exposed the reality of inequalities within our society. Though it is still a privilege in many parts of the world, online classes are not unheard of in education. Ware & Kramsch (2005) state that the gains of computational components in class go from interactions across geographic, linguistic, and cultural realms. Learners are equipped beyond Foreign Language Education. From elementary to higher education, some presence of a digital resource has been getting widespread (KOHNKE; MOORHOUSE, 2020). Yet, the sudden shift to remote learning due to COVID-19 wide opened the doors to everyone's houses, and a harsh reality of lack of infrastructure was exposed. The impact was, *and still is*, even more severe in rural areas and among below poverty line population because of network issues.

Along the way, everyone had to learn how to adapt as the society was getting ill. Initially, many educational institutions and universities required learners to have their cameras on during classes, including the sample population in this study. Amplifying learners' voices during "shelter-in-place" federal and state orders have been a cornerstone ever since. What happens if the mobile phone rings, a sibling stomps in, an infant starts crying, or a pet decides to join the class inadvertently? Life happens, as simple as that. Milman (2020) referred to this as *Pandemic Pedagogy*, a term coined to portray daily mini crises, such as having to watch a class in a car to access the university Wi-Fi because of inconsistent or unreliable Internet access at home. Information about courses should truly represent the educator's care and a real move towards implementation of equity for accessing and navigation of its contents. Custodio (2020) points out to the concerning fact that students with disabilities face even more challenges on top of the ones listed.

> According to the National Center for College Students With Disabilities, about one-fifth of undergraduates and 12 percent of graduate students have some kind of disability. For many of those students, the nationwide shift to online learning brings additional accessibility problems. (CUSTODIO, 2020).

Howard adds that in such cases "some simple steps like using the correct font and materials with subtitles and other alternatives beyond colors to convey meaning are essential as inclusive by educators" (HOWARD, 2020). One can imagine the impact of the pandemic on those who already faced challenges before it took place among us. Thus, it is essential that educators take into consideration also the adaptations for students with disabilities to promote a more inclusive educational system.

Moreover, a new set of words in our daily vocabulary expanded the lexicon to refer to what currently represented one's routine, either creating new terminology or putting to use some not as common before the pandemic: Zoom©, synchronous, asynchronous, remote, hybrid, Zoom© fatigue, netiquette, and had sanitizer, just to mention a few, translated the new reality. Even the behavior in front of and behind the cameras had to be standardized to guarantee some uniformity. Behind the cameras, one should re-learn how to wash hands, apply hand sanitizer, wear masks (and properly handle, store, and dispose them). In front of the cameras, new attitude and behavior were set to maintain a positive environment and guarantee integrity of the relationships and ethical procedures.

Regarding netiquette, Slapak-Barski (2021) employs a ruling approach in the field of Marine Biology that prescribes what the author defines as the non-obvious assertive behavior,

as ground rules for Zoom© participation were not as obvious as they were expected to be. The solution was to provide training of high-leverage practices to scale in a time of unprecedented changes, limited resources, rushed timelines, and variations in modes of delivery.

For language and culture teaching it was no different – actually, the new format challenged a little more when it came to the practice of the speaking skill. Among all four skills of proficiency in teaching a language – writing, reading, listening, and speaking – this last one particularly requires an interaction with another speaker to maintain communication as the feedback between the speakers feeds the process and maintains learning through practice. Reading can be done by oneself, listening comprehension may be practiced through a podcast, a video presentation, etc., and one can verify their writing ability with no required human interaction whatsoever. Thus, Projeto Parceiro para Intercâmbio Cultural (PPIC) was envisioned as a venue for learners to interact remotely with other Portuguese speakers and the classroom practice would be somewhat addressed while face to face classroom practice was on a halt with no definite time to return.

The language exchange was created first, for one semester, namely Spring 2020, right after the interruption of classes mid-March. This study focuses on the intercultural interactions between second language learners and native speakers of Portuguese from universities in Midwest and West Coast United States and in Brazil, respectively. The exploratory design applied in here allowed for a purposeful sample, in which the participants meet the criteria to serve the population of interest. Ultimately, it was observed that, as the pandemic became more severe in the subsequent semester of Fall 2020, the language practice parcel of classes was amplified to a cultural component. In other words, we concluded that intercultural communication meant to become more inclusive of topics and to have a broader perception of the interactions beyond the vocabulary and grammar contents lined up in the textbook. As learners were advancing in the level as well, so would the requirements for a more challenging curriculum program. Another layer of this challenge was the fact that now learners would be interacting with native speakers from Brazil (majoring in Philosophy and Law, at PUC Minas, at Coração Eucarístico e São Gabriel campuses, both in Belo Horizonte). The secondary analysis of existing data does not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) review when it does not fall within the regulatory definition of research involving human subjects' medical experiments, protected population as children, parole, and pregnant women. Public use data sets are prepared with the intent of making them available for the public.

Although somewhat intimidating for learners who were entering the fourth semester of the language, results proved that the decision was successful in most of its aspects, which will be addressed later.

2 THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

The steps the instructors took to prepare the project include 1) creating a course map to set the structure with a full view of it with course objectives; 2) define number of classes per unit; 3) define content per unit; 4) name required materials (new and already existing) and activities (new and already existing; 5) identify tools; and 5) select assessment (Image 1). As previously described, this study does not make use of identifiable information. Nor does it disclose biodata of the purposeful sample. Therefore, as it is merely manipulating secondary data cross continentally, this study is exempt from the issuance of an IRB. The identity of the individuals is only readily ascertained by the researchers using encrypted codes.

Image 1 - Course map - Partner for Cultural Exchange Project - Module Objectives, Resources, and Activities. All rights reserved- California State University, Stanislaus. Image used for research purpose with appropriate educational objectives in nature, amount, and effect. No copyright required under the guidelines of fair use.

Module OBJECTIVES	Existing RESOURCES	Necessary RESOURCES or necessary modifications to existing resources	Existing ACTIVITIES	Necessary ACTIVITIES or necessary modifications to existing resources	ASSESSMENT Identify if new or existing ones
- Identify proper greetings and other expressions to start and maintain conversation in Portuguese.	- Background language knowledge.	- Info. to collect during interaction. - Camera (phone, computer) with proper software to record interactions.	- None	- Write down specific aspects to ask about a partner. - Recorded Zoom meeting by participants.	- Oral/written feedback on correctness of language used to prepare questions for the interaction and to reproduce answers from the interaction - Written feedback on questionnaire answers. - Self-reflection on participation.
- Identify and understand statements about daily routine	- Same	- Same	- None	- Same	- Same
- Explain concepts of history and its importance.	- Same	- Same	- None	- Same	- Same
- Explain concepts of emotional memory and its importance.	- Same	- Same	- None	- Same	- Same

Written and oral communication were the learning goals. The participants from the USA university were at the intermediate level of Portuguese to articulate knowledge of cultural aspects of both countries (Brazil and USA) through remote instruction. The map includes existing assignments and needs (new) assignments or modifications to current assignments, existing resources and needed (new) resources or modifications to current resources, assessment(s), and module objectives. Module objectives represent the steps to achieve proposed learning goals. An alignment of all those items in a course map is necessary to adjust efforts as one can tailor tools, assignments, and assessments at their best to optimize learning experiences. Each interview represents an entry at the course map.

The Backward Design (Image 2) was the basis for the course map, using as the Learning Outcomes as the start point. It started from the expected results to determine which evidence, instruction, and learning experiences should be delivered to culminate in those desired results.

Image 2

Backward Design

1. Identify expected results. (L.O.)

2. Determine acceptable evidence.

3. Deliver instruction/learning experiences.
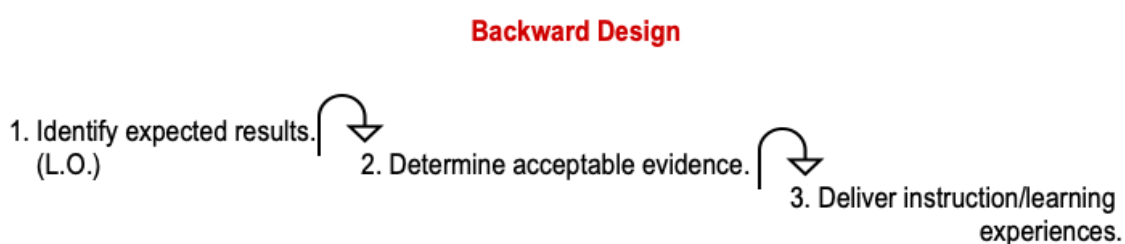
Source: WIGGINS, Grant & McTIGHE, Jay. (2005). Image used for research purpose with appropriate educational objectives in nature, amount, and effect. No copyright required under the guidelines of fair use.

As for the learners, the preparation for the meetings included reading authentic and non-authentic materials, watching video clips, listening to podcasts, and reviewing various grammar topics. Some of the materials consist of updated information on current events and topics in Brazil, such as environmental issues and more conceptual topics such as ethics and emotional memory. The number of meetings varied from 2 to 4 according to each semester. Participants were to prepare a set of questions based on the items suggested by the instructor with the possibility to add questions as they wished to contribute to the conversation on the topic. The steps are as follows:

1. Learners from the two participant universities were randomly paired by the instructors (the uneven number of participants required only one group with 3 participants). One of

the instructors shared the contact e-mail from learners for the first contact and introductions.

2. Learners emailed each other to set availability for the first interview according to the first deadline to turn in their assignment: the recording of their interview.

3. Learners learned how to set a Zoom$^{©}$ meeting and invited their counterpart for the interview.

4. Learners recorded their conversation alternating asking and answering questions based on the preselected topic.

5. Learners provided a Microsoft Word$^{©}$ document with questions they prepared, the answers they collected from their counterpart, a paragraph summarizing the interview, and the link to the recordings of the meeting.

2.1 ZOOM - THE ELECTED TOOL

The many aspects of the speaking component of a language skill that accompany an oral interaction were the main reason that we foresaw a loss from remote instruction. Projeto Parceiro para Intercâmbio Cultural intends to remedy the importance of socialization and human interaction, body language, intonation, lexicon, instant feedback as reassurance, and culturally infused aspects of a second or third language learning through visual contact, even if it was intermediated by video cameras.

The first project, named Partner Language Exchange Project (PLEP), involved two instructors of a second language in two different universities, on different time zones of the United States (Pacific Standard Time and Eastern Standard Time) through tasks that challenge them in a higher level of performance with meaningful purpose to substitute in-class interactions and a group oral summative assessment. PPIC crossed international borders to involve learners from two different countries: Brazil and USA. The challenge was an upgrade in their communicative experience, allowing those learning Portuguese in the US to contact and practice a second language with a native speaker of Portuguese in Brazil. Beyond grammatical contents, Portuguese L2 learners from California experienced talking with native speakers from PUC Minas, who also benefit from this cross-cultural experience discussion philosophical topics, such as ethics, notions of citizenship, and cultural aspects of both countries. Besides, the states of Minas Gerais and California share in their history similarities on the golden rush and their remarkable uniqueness culinary diversity.

The leap in the requirement caused some initial doubts by those learning this second language because they were aware of the differences between learning a language in the classroom (even more so since the beginning of the remote instruction emergency need because of the COVID-19 pandemic). Learning management systems (LMS) at this university in the United States included Canvas© and Moodle©, and the recommended tool to deliver online classes was Zoom©. This selection ensured safety to all participants, safeguarding privacy, and protecting information and participants from unwanted participants by granting access only to those logged in through the university account or allowed by the creator of the meeting. As mentioned previously in this article, adequacy of behavior and expectations in the procedures of delivering classes were described by the university through a series of items named *netiquette*. Questions on the obligation to have a camera on during classes became an issue because, among others, home privacy, availability of large bandwidth, and location of residencies became an impediment to many of the participants to have access to classes. Even though adaptive plans to minimize some of the issues were put to place, the socioeconomic aspect of the learner's profile demand more than adaptations of Internet issues.

Provided that learners from both sides – Brazil and USA – could safely establish communication through a video camera, the project was able to include various other aspects of the cultures of both countries, including the participants' daily routine, university degree/major, discussion of relevant topics to their academic studies and professional career, and some other relevant aspects of nowadays lives.

3 ACADEMIC DEBATE

First described by Benjamin Bloom (BLOOM *et al*. 1956), the taxonomy has evolved from a description of learning objectives to a means of classifying the level of thinking that certain types of questions or tasks demand of learners. Higher order thinking or tasks are those that require learners to analyze, evaluate, or create; lower order tasks involve knowing (remembering), understanding, and applying. Furthermore, it is also postulated educational objectives, one in which such acts as making a personal connection to a text might be categorized as low-level cognition. Understanding refers to the degree to which learners can correctly answer multiple-choice questions on reading assessments; other ways of engaging are presumably not critical to what might emerge from reading.

In commensuration to Bloom's taxonomy, the basilar theory applied onto Projeto Parceiro para Intercâmbio Cultural, scholars have claimed that, for the reader, inscribing oneself in a text can help construct a meaningful reading interaction (SMAGORINSKY; COPPOCK, 1995), contribute to identity development (BROWN *et al.*, 2007), provide an intertextual connection between life experiences and other texts (GALDA; BEACH, 2001), and provide other means of access to both content and material for generating meaning as part of a reading experience. Such inscriptions involve not just decoding but encoding a text with meaning, that is, the application to real-world scenarios, which is aligned with Project Based Learning theoretical framework.

Project Based Learning (PBL) revitalizes class environment due to its application in real-world scenarios, its use of challenges to increase knowledge and skills during designated project periods (BRANDL, 2002; CONDLIFFE *et al.*, 2017; OMAGGIO-HADLEY; TERRY, 2001). The goal of using complex questions or problems is to develop and enhance learning by encouraging critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and self-management. Leiva Matus (2018, p. 18) exemplifies the intentional purpose with a book project of English as a Foreign Language to tenth graders after participation and independence were detected by a needs analysis, "the need was born from the fact that they had a hard time reading three literary books from different subjects at the same time, probably because they did not know what to pay attention to in a book" (LEIVA MATUS, 2018, p. 18).

With respect to purposefulness, Dooly & Randall (2016) state that the proposed question of a project drives learners to make their own decisions, perform their own research, while they review their own and their fellow learners' processes. Thus, in addition to finding resources, developing project timelines, and learning to overcome obstacles, learners have the opportunity to publicly display their work. We argue that displaying their cultural products in public gives the learners the chance to grow their presentational communication while explaining the outcome of their project. Participants from both sides mentioned multiple times the positive aspects of the project. Students from PUC Minas pointed out aspects such as the possibility to demystify stereotypes of universities of the United States, as portrayed by Hollywood, which in many ways diminishes the relevance of education. Also, the opportunity to engage in communication in their native language (Portuguese) was more than once mentioned as an empowering experience aspect of the project.

PBL is an integral key for increasing learners' success and long-term growth. The combination of collaboration, reflection, and individual decision-making gives the learners an

applicable scenario they will face as they mature. Moreover, the authenticity of PBL allows learners to voice their personal interests, concerns, or issues that are significant parts of their lives. Instead of a pre-determined project or assignment, learners can witness the issues or concerns in their community, discover one that they find particularly interesting, and brainstorm ways to address or solve the problem (TROYAN, 2012). Allowing learners to have this control, PBL can develop deeper learning proficiencies necessary for career building (FRAGOULIS & TSIPLAKIDES, 2009).

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The unprecedented times and events the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded threw right into our routines a new set of challenges on how to manage daily activities. As for the educational system, teaching and learning practices asked for prompt restructuring of the process, from the physical spaces to the tools applied by students and instructors, ways of delivery, and assessment. As we are moving forward bringing with us such an experience, it is necessary to highlight what has been done to adapt and reconfigure some strategies that might remain and carried on to the next academic semesters and learn from the experiences of those that might not have achieved the expected results.

PPIC proved to be a positive and enriching experience for all participants. Learners were able to connect and practice a second language (orally and in written) through a tool that is not new to language learning: video. Besides, being able to have real experience exchanging information with native speakers provided both with multiple possibilities of learning beyond the traditional classroom setting. Instructors could amplify the curriculum content by opening the opportunities for students' engagement in conversations that developed organically as they happened among the learners. Even though there were pre-set topics to be discussed and some expected grammar structures to be applied in the interactions, the participants advanced further while addressing other topics and frequently included more grammar structures than the expected ones. It is significant to mention that most of the Portuguese learners from the USA who participated in the project are heritage speakers of Spanish (80%) or Portuguese (10% - third generation) which widens their possibility to apply grammar structures not yet learned formally in the classroom. This project is still taking place after its second semester and will probably become a part of the curriculum for its benefits. A similar project has been used amongst the universities in the USA and other ones throughout

the world and it is likely that PPIC will be integrated in such a project, which could expand even more the boarders of Portuguese reaching beyond USA and Brazil. In case it does, it will become even richer as the possibilities to aggregate other cultures and cultural experiences shall overcome barriers among the participants and widen classroom settings to form citizens of the world.

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