

## Teaching in COVID-19 Times: Challenges, Promises, and Progress /

### *O Ensino na era da COVID-19: desafios, promessas e progressos*

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#### ABSTRACT

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The Coronavirus pandemic that landed among us has created unparalleled consequences to every sector of society. From equity-minded student services, online class delivery, professional workshops for instructors, to basic needs, and psychological services, academia is facing several challenges that will forever impact its structure and ways to approach education. This study presents the first results of an ongoing project that aims to address the decrease of oral language opportunities caused by the sudden switch from face to face to online teaching scenario. Thus, a project was created to promote language skills practice in Portuguese between two universities in the United States: The Partner Language Exchange Project. The project aims to establish Learning Outcomes (LO) well aligned with tools, strategies of delivery, and assessment to provide quality for teaching and learning experience. Therefore, it applies Bloom's Taxonomy to prepare LO and Quality Learning and Teaching (QLT) Instrument to layout a Course Map using backward design as guideline. The Partner Language Exchange Project (PLEP) consists of a series of interactions among students to interview each other based on pre-set topics and to relate them to the COVID-19 impact on their daily routines. Students were in charge of preparing and answering questions, creating paragraphs, and setting their own Zoom® meetings.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19; Online teaching; Portuguese; Project-based learning; Second-language acquisition.

### RESUMO

*A pandemia do Coronavírus que se instalou entre nós tem gerado inigualáveis consequências para todos os setores da sociedade. Dos serviços para sanear a desigualdade de oportunidades entre os estudantes, performance de aulas on-line, workshops profissionais para instrutores, incluindo as necessidades básicas e serviços psicológicos, o meio acadêmico tem enfrentado vários desafios que irão afetar permanentemente sua estrutura e formas de abordagem educacional. O presente estudo delinea os primeiros resultados de um projeto em curso que visa oferecer opções para a diminuição das oportunidades de prática de linguagem oral causada pela mudança repentina do cenário de ensino presencial para o online. Tal projeto, The Partner Language Exchange Project, foi posto em prática através da colaboração entre duas universidades dos Estados Unidos. A partir do alinhamento dos Resultados de Aprendizagem (RA) com as ferramentas de ensino, as estratégias de prática educacional e a avaliação busca-se fornecer qualidade na experiência de ensino e aprendizagem. Para tal, o projeto aplica a Taxonomia de Bloom para preparar os RA e a Qualidade de Ensino e Aprendizagem (QEA) para traçar um Mapa do Curso usando o backward design como diretriz. O Partner Language Exchange Project (PLEP) consiste em uma série de interações entre estudantes para entrevistar uns aos outros com base em temas predefinidos e para relacioná-los com o impacto da COVID-19 em suas rotinas diárias. Os alunos ficaram encarregados de preparar e responder as perguntas das entrevistas, compor parágrafos a partir delas e criar as próprias reuniões através da aplicação Zoom®.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** COVID-19; Ensino online; Português; Aprendizagem baseada em projeto; Aquisição de segunda língua.

## 1 Introduction

The events related to the COVID-19 pandemic have shaken many of the structures of the teaching and learning settings throughout the globe at all levels. As a consequence (and assuming that the number of face-to-face interactions surpasses largely both hybrid and online formats together), there is a need to rethink and restructure educators' mind setting about how to deliver quality work while away from our traditional classroom settings. Aspects such as syllabus preparation, tools for practicing content-based items, including evidence collection on a daily basis (observing, for example, consistency of mispronunciations), and performance-based assessments need to be observed and realigned with the new online teaching scenario. The many variables that

came to place as the quickly increase of infection by the Coronavirus in the world kept pushing everyone into their living spaces and forcing classrooms to find a corner inside their house.

Syllabi and course structures for presential classes should differ considerably from online (synchronous and asynchronous) teaching. No matter the way classes are delivered, from the beginning, when creating a syllabus to the final moment of a project, as students provide feedback, syllabi should offer easy accessibility to information and navigation through courses, as well as address access needs by students with disability. Syllabi consist “the first textual contact students have with their instructors” (WOOD & MADDEN, 2014). Statements about accessibility should reflex an educator’s care and concrete implementation of “equal access” to course content and navigation. Taking into account that “According to the National Center of College Students with Disabilities, about one-fifth of undergraduates and 12 percent of graduate students have some kind of disability” (CUSTODIO, 2020), some simple steps “such as the correct choice of a font, selection of materials with closed captioning, and the use of more than just colors to convey meaning play an essential role as inclusive initiatives by educators” (HOWARD, 2020). Thus, let’s take a moment right now to try to imagine how shifting to virtual teaching and learning has increased the obstacles that students with disability already had to deal with on a daily basis. By not taking into consideration the above-mentioned steps, any instructor will be increasing inequalities adding impediments for students with disabilities to perform under similar conditions that are offered to their colleagues.

Even before the occurrence of the Coronavirus pandemic, several Internet-based application and programs for language classes were part of language programs, some of them part of required materials accompanying textbooks to promote interactivity among students. The one used in this study is by Zoom Communications Inc. for video conferencing, frequently referred as Zoom®. Created in 2011, it was the adopted platform to deliver virtual classes to the students at both universities involved in the Partner Language Exchange Project. Even though Instructors have been presented with innumerous interfaces to promote interaction and somewhat redeem the angst for not being back to face-to-face delivery, the myriad of options, on the other hand, can sometimes generate the opposite effect, becoming a source of anxiety about which tools to select, the necessary support, besides worries about instabilities of Internet connection, and the amount of bandwidth to have programs running smoothly. The platform selected by PLEP was adopted for the purpose of allowing students to engage in more than just using it to practice language, but also as an opportunity to handle its operation by taking an active role to create the meetings, performing

during the meetings, and producing evidence of its use. Here again, accessibility cannot be off sight and equality has to be part of the decisions made by the instructor while selecting tools and assessment to optimize and promote learning in any format of teaching, but mostly when face-to-face instruction is not an option and several adaptations are required to deliver instruction.

In order to tie delivery of instruction and assessment to course learning objectives (CLO), sometimes identified as learning outcomes (LO) the PLEP has established an alignment to promote the best use of time and explore the prime aspects of a tool (an app, for example) by engaging learners with class content, and yet making sense of the selected assessment strategies for collecting evidence. As an example, one can select an application that helps students to practice with a phone enabling spelling and accent marks as a good choice if spelling is part of the CLO and enables students to be assessed in such a skill – be it during or at the end of a unit, chapter, etc., or at the end of a course. As part of the project instructors used both formative and summative types of assessment: as formative assessment provides feedback while learners are in the process of acquiring knowledge and help educators to improve instruction by modifying what fails to do so; it is an ongoing strategy that becomes an ally to all participants; combined with summative assessment, usually at the end of a chapter, unit, etc., summative assessment provides accountability of competency evaluating the achievement of LO's. It is from the combination of both formative and summative that instructors could provide a more complete feedback to students and, at the same time, follow the process of interactions and adjust strategies to successfully achieve LO's.

## 2 Curriculum adaptation

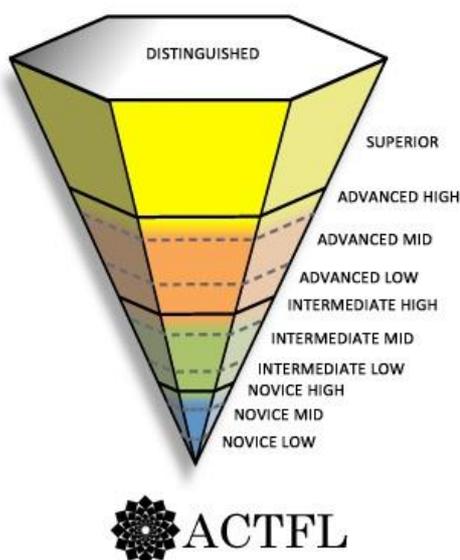
The PLEP was created to adapt the curriculum to the new educational arena with the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic and to keep promoting the oral skill practice among students. When students interact daily during face-to-face classroom meetings, the oral component of language learning accompanies the acquisition of the other skills: reading, writing, and listening; but the abrupt shift into remote instruction caused a loss to the benefits of daily exchanges, as the limitations of interactivity by video-camera conferences impose a much smaller amount of time of social contact and performance. Reading, writing, and listening are skills that can be practiced by individuals on their own, even though with some limitations. Speaking, as the means of exchanging



meaningful information with another interlocutor, demands a level of interaction set up by constant exposition to a variety of factors: lexicon, body language, intonation, search of reassurance, besides culturally infused aspects that accompany human interactions. Either while sharing short conversation with the instructor or a classmate, having other students as the audience, or while in the breakout rooms provided by virtual meetings, one has to be aware of the multitude of information the brain processes during a conversation that includes the visual interaction that accompanies oral communications among the participants.

As the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled our face-to-face classes, an oral exam used during face-to-face classes needed to be substituted by an alternative oral assessment to provide feedback on students' oral skill: PLEP became that alternative. By exchanging experiences with colleagues, researching on project-based learning, quality online teaching and learning, and many other ways to facilitate such interactions, two colleagues teaching second language in two different universities, on different time zones of the U.S., decided to create a project to generate opportunities for students to interact, maintain, or even surpass the opportunities to practice language as they would face to face – if not so much by the total of time of interactions, but 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.

Image 1



Source: ACTFL©, INC., 2012 Inverted Pyramid with the different levels of language proficiency. Available at <https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012>.

The oral exam was designed to observe groups of 3 randomly selected students engaged in a 7-minute conversation on those pre-selected topics. While conversing, they were evaluated through a chart adapted from the ACTFL® Proficiency Guidelines-2012. The Guidelines describes five different levels of proficiency: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice (Image 1). The major levels Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice are divided in three following sublevels: High, Mid, and Low. Students were assessed according to individual performances on appropriateness of vocabulary use, grammar application (verb tenses, structure of sentences, prepositions), maintenance of discourse on the target-language, and contribution to the flow of the interaction. A rubric on individual performances is made available to students as part of the course syllabus and oral feedback on performances were provided per request during office hours.

### 3 Designing quality-learning experiences

As part of designing a new course syllabus adapted to a new academic reality, a project was created to substitute a former summative oral exam that students take in the end of the semester, aimed to assess and promote the development of the oral language skill. The former oral exam was the students' last oral interaction prior to the final written test. Throughout a face-to-face semester, students interacted on a daily basis in small groups to complete short tasks asking and answering questions or would engage in pairs to perform brief dialogues on suggested unit topics from the textbook.

#### 3.1 Shaping up the project

By creating the opportunity for students to interact with each other remotely through interviews, the project encompasses various steps as preparation for their performance. Students are provided with items, not questions, from which they compose a short questionnaire to collect information from their interviewees. These provide students with more autonomy to create questions they ask and respond to, instead of receiving questionnaires already prepared by instructors or provided by the textbook.

In order to be prepared to ask and answer questions for the interview, online authentic reading and video watching assignments are used as supportive materials. The advantages of these resources are innumerable, from being up to date with current daily topics to promoting higher levels of engagement with course content. Its meaningfulness is enhanced as students are always asked to associate topics to their own experience and daily routine.

The Project Language Partner Exchange consists of a sequence of 3 semesters of interviews and interactions amongst Portuguese learners at a US university and other students around the world. The emphasis is to promote language learning through engaging in conversations in the target language with other students who are either learning Portuguese or native speakers of Portuguese. Each semester consists one part out of the three described as follows: first, with other US students learning Portuguese (Fall 2020), then with Brazilian college students (Spring 2021), and, finally, with native speakers of Continental Portuguese (Africa, Asia, or Europe – Fall 2021). This is an ongoing project and this Fall-2020 semester students will participate of 5 interactions/interviews. They are now in the process of finishing the second interview.

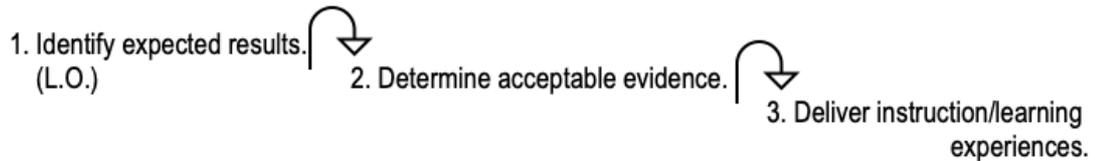
### 3.2 Course map and interviews

A course map for the project was generated using Backward Design (Image 2) based on the Learning Outcomes for this second/third semester of Portuguese. It started from the expected results as a way to determine what is the evidence that best ensures those results; then we plan instruction and learning experiences to be delivered to culminate in those desired results.

The Learning Goals include effective intermediate level written and oral communication in Portuguese, and articulation of knowledge on cultural aspects of countries where Portuguese is the official language compared to other cultures (US and other Latin American countries). In order to adapt to remote instruction, the map includes existing assignments and needed (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.

Image 2

**Backward Design**



Source: WIGGINS, Grant & McTIGHE, Jay. (2005).

Having the project efficiently substituting the oral exam demanded instructors to create standardized procedures to guarantee achieving the LO's as well to allow participants to take the same steps towards the completion of assignments. The steps are as follows:

1. Students from the two participant universities were randomly paired by the instructors (the uneven number of participants required only one group with 3 students). One of the instructors shared the contact e-mail from students for the first contact and introductions.
2. Students 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. Students learned how to set a Zoom® meeting and invited their counterpart for the interview.
4. Students recorded their interviews alternating asking and answering questions based on the preselected topic.
5. Students 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.

#### 4 A going-on project

A rubric was created to evaluate each interview and to offer a feedback to students. Assessment includes written production: the structure of questions and answers in a sentence, the accuracy of vocabulary to convey adequate meaning, and the structure of paragraphs; and oral

performance – well addressed topics when referring to videos, readings, and other materials covered in class, interviewer's consistent use of target language, and proper vocabulary.

The first topic was "Greetings, introductions, daily routine activities, preferences on food and other cultural products". Students were presented a series of words/partial questions such as "greetings & introductions; course/major, minor? daily routine? personality; preferred food, why? food not liked, why? career/future plans? something curious about yourself? The words were presented in English and students prepared full questions in the target language. This procedure requests students to structure sentences in Portuguese as well as write down the responses from their counterpart. With the interview recorded, students could access responses and have better sense of the whole conversation. The final step is to write down a couple of paragraphs summarizing the conversation. The summary should contain the essence of the conversation, not a repetition of questions and answers. This procedure was used as an opportunity for students to put together the sentences by themselves and to write summaries, which demands more accurate use of lexicon and precision in delivering information.

The analysis of time used for interactions, lexicon, verb use/conjugation, as well as the cultural aspects involved in the conversations are the largest part of the data. The study will also consider the progress of students throughout the semester and the qualitative data provided by students after the project.

### Concluding remarks

The project has been running well with students progressively feeling more confident and prepared for the interactions as they made comments after the first interview. In their paragraphs, students include comments on the experience and self-perception during the interaction. Zoom® interviews have presented challenges such as ways to save the recordings, causing many times links to malfunction. Another downside to the participants has occurred due to the layers of protection used by both universities: in order to secure privacy, students are required to log into their university platform access, which can guarantee access to their materials only with those within the system but granting access to the recordings by their counterparts (students and instructors) has generated extra back-and-forth emails to solve the issue. Those two negative aspects could be addressed by maintaining some already required layers of protection when

generating the meeting: students should select “allow waiting room” in order to delete unsolicited participants into their work and “generate a password” that would be shared only with the interviewer and the interviewee.

An alternative to share video recording of the interview with instructors has been through YouTube® platform. Access to YouTube® video is free of charge and offers a couple of layers to protect privacy. The first one is to set the video URL “private”: only when the owner of the video changes the setting to “available to public”, the video becomes available. Then the owner(s) can inform instructors that the video is up. Instructors watch it. Students set it “private” again to prevent further access to it. The second option is to set the video URL “unlisted”. The URL is not listed at the YouTube® website, and the video can be accessed only by those who have its URL. A somewhat frequent issue about YouTube® is that apparently some videos cannot exceed 15 minutes, but students have figured a way to have their videos available even the ones over 40-minute long.

In the first round of interview, the average time spent per student was about 20 minutes. When considering that this is an ongoing interaction, it represents a substantial increase in the average time when compared to the usual multiple two-minute interactions on face-to-face meetings. This is a very significant point to this project because conversations that require engagement and contextualization demand a much larger range of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Partner Language Exchange Project is an alternative for the decrease of oral interactions in class addressing such a loss by providing students with a much longer time in contact in the target language. Besides, the course content has included a larger amount of reading and listening authentic of materials (including video watching). Those are produced by native speakers from various cultures of Portuguese Language origins: Luso-African, Portuguese, Brazilian, and Macanese. The idea is to provide students with a very diverse variation of the language to promote a better knowledge of cultures of Portuguese Language. The selection is based on the topic for each interaction and aims to furnish conversations with meaningful content, always establishing a connection to nowadays and current events.

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