

LEARNING AND HAVING FUN USING ICT TOOLS: APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

APRENDENDO E BRINCANDO USANDO AS TICS: ABORDAGEM DO APRENDIZADO DE LÍNGUAS

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RESUMO: No âmbito do ensino superior, a noção de aprender a brincar não é ainda vista como válida por muitos académicos. No entanto, com a implementação do Processo de Bolonha e de uma abordagem mais centrada no aluno, assim como a introdução das Tecnologias de Informação e Comunicação (TIC) no ensino, algumas atividades que pertenciam exclusivamente à esfera do lúdico gradualmente ganharam relevância, inclusivamente no seio do ensino superior. Na Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (UAL), uma universidade privada portuguesa, todas as unidades curriculares de Língua Estrangeira incluem uma vertente online disponível na sua plataforma de elearning. O nosso objetivo é descrever as atividades lúdicas desenvolvidas em duas unidades curriculares de língua estrangeira - Inglês e Português, nomeadamente, apresentações vídeo, animações, podcasts e exercícios interativos. Por último, analisaremos, com base num inquérito realizado em 2010/2011, como estas atividades são percecionadas pelos alunos, referiremos as atividades a decorrer neste ano letivo e eventuais propostas para o futuro.

Palavras-chave: atividades lúdicas, ensino universitário, Tecnologias de Informação e comunicação

ABSTRACT: Playing and learning are not commonly linked at higher education level. However, with the Bologna Process, the shift towards a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning and the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools in the learning environment, ludic activities which initially were carried out using ICT have gradually gained relevance in the academic world. At Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (UAL), a private university in Lisbon, Portugal, the course units of Foreign Language (English, Portuguese, German, Spanish and Mandarin) include online activities in their syllabi made available on the university's elearning platform. This paper will focus on ludic activities, namely video presentations, animations, podcasts and interactive exercises, carried out within two language course units – English and Portuguese. Moreover, as a survey was applied to all language students in the academic year 2010/2011 on the perceived relevance of these tools/resources on the students' learning experience, we will also discuss the results of the survey as well as our present and future activities.

Keywords: ludic activities, higher education, Information and Communication Technologies

1. INTRODUCTION

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Many authors discuss the usefulness and impact computer games have on learning. Rieber & Noah state that games are a way of knowing the world, mediation between experience and understanding (Rieber & Noah, 2008, p. 79) and Gredler says that games and simulations share the fact that they develop activities in an imaginary context and offer control over the activity (Gredler, 2003, p. 575). However, it is often the case that the use of games is restricted - they are not viewed as learning objects not only by educators but by the learners themselves. Considering that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been increasingly applied in teaching and learning activities, even within higher education, as well as used by learners for ludic situations, this may represent a possibility to combine learning and playing and thereby boost learners' motivation and skills.

The resources of the ICT help the interactivity necessary to the process of knowledge building, as well as the organization of the contents to be taught in order to establish a more adequate relationship with learner's daily situations and different levels of abstraction involved in content taught. (Silveira et al., 2011, p. 78).

The interactive potential of ICT tools provides students the opportunity to experience learning situations which would be impossible to recreate in a traditional classroom. This paper will focus on several such tools used at a private university in Lisbon, Portugal, Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (UAL), within the scope of the language department, namely, in classes of Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) and of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

In 2011, five years after introducing ICT in our classes, a survey was applied so as to assess the perceived importance of these tools by the students in terms of their learning experience. Evidence demonstrated that ICT tools were considered very relevant and that learners viewed this approach as improving the process of language learning, making it easier and more fun. This survey allowed the educators involved the confidence and drive to move forward and continue integrating ICT tools and playing in their classes and in the elearning platform.

2. LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH PLAYING (AT UAL)

With the implementation of the Bologna Process, UAL introduced a semester of EFL in the study plan of all its Undergraduate degrees and promoted the shift towards a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. ICT tools were considered an important tool for that goal by the language department and, thus, the course unit of EFL includes online resources available through the university's elearning platform. These resources encompass

interactive exercises, video presentations with grammar or vocabulary explanations, among others. Besides this, other activities using video production, animation and podcasting tools have been used within specific class projects.

2.1. Video production activities

Two tools have been used by different classes to produce video: Voicethread© and Photostory©. These tools were used with different objectives and production methods.

Voicethread©

A Voicethread is a collaborative, multimedia slide show that holds images, documents, and videos and allows people to navigate slides and leave comments in 5 ways - using voice (with a mic or telephone), text, audio file, or video (via a webcam). Share a Voicethread with friends, students, and colleagues for them to record comments too. (tool description at www.voicethread.com)

Voicethread© was first used with a class of Erasmus students learning Portuguese. These 16 EILC (Erasmus Intensive Language Course) students were attending a three-week intensive course which included a walking tour of the city of Lisbon. Throughout the visit, they would have to take pictures of specific places and, among all the pictures they had taken, they would have to select their two favourite and write a text on them. At the end of the course, an exhibition would be organized at the university with all the pictures and texts. Besides the exhibition, students, as a group, organized a Voicethread© of all the pictures and recorded the text they had produced. This Voicethread© also included comments on pictures by students who had not participated in the walking tour but had selected their favourite pictures among all those included in the Voicethread©. Examples of this use of Voicethread© are available in the classes' blogs at <http://eilclisboa-julho2010.blogspot.com/p/exposicao-de-fotografias.html>.

Erasmus Intensive Language Courses may be of two levels: Elementary, for students who know very little or no Portuguese, and Intermediate, for students who can already speak the language. Elementary students participated in the class project which was previously described; Intermediate students were required to organize an individual Voicethread© presentation on their country or region's typical food. For this project, students would have to select pictures, organize their own scripts, write and record texts, thus using vocabulary and structures they had acquired before and during the course. Students were further encouraged to watch their colleagues' projects and comment on them, exchanging information and promoting tolerance in a multicultural environment. Examples of these presentations may be found in the classes' blog at <http://eilclisboa-setembro2010.blogspot.com/p/comida-tipica.html> or

wiki <http://eilclisboajaneiro2011intermedio.pbworks.com/w/page/35599686/comida%20romena> (example of a Voicethread© on Romanian food).

The use of this tool was an important part of the EILC since the course included a module on the academic use of ICT. Thus, the objective behind the use of Voicethread© was twofold: to provide students with the opportunity to know a new tool which might be relevant in terms of academic presentations as well as allow them to express their ideas and thoughts in the language they were starting to learn (Portuguese) integrating the skills they had acquired in the previous three weeks (see Fernandes Silva & Rodrigues Duarte, 2011).

In the academic year of 2010/2011, a class project called Building Bridges with Language (see Fernandes Silva, 2011) was developed at our university in which two groups, one of Portuguese students and another of Iranian students, exchanged information and wrote an online magazine on what they had learned about their counterparts' country. For the Portuguese students, the first step of the project included the production of a video presentation on Portugal, which was developed using Voicethread©. The class discussed the themes they believed would be interesting for the Iranian colleagues and then, in groups, organized the script, selected images, wrote and recorded the texts and finally uploaded them on to the project's wiki <http://secondsemester2010.pbworks.com/w/page/36643154/Filipe%20and%20Eliana>.

In the present academic year of 2011/2012, a class project called Breaking Barriers is underway. A class of Portuguese students and a class of Turkish students have joined a Facebook© page created especially for the project and on that page they will exchange Voicethread© presentations on their country as well as comment on the Voicethread© presentations posted by their counterparts.

Photostory

Create slideshows using your digital photos. With a single click, you can touch-up, crop, or rotate pictures. Add stunning special effects, soundtracks, and your own voice narration to your photo stories. Then, personalize them with titles and captions. Small file sizes make it easy to send your photo stories in an e-mail. Watch them on your TV, a computer, or a Windows Mobile-based portable device. (tool description at www.photostory.com)

In the academic year of 2010/2011, the tool Photostory© was used by two different groups of students - a class attending the degree in Communication Sciences and another attending EILC (elementary level).

The Communication group was asked to introduce themselves using Photostory within the already mentioned interchange project *Building Bridges with Language*. Students

had to decide on the point of view of their presentation, whether they were going to talk about their daily life, their life story, their hobbies or their typical weekend, just to mention a few of the options chosen. Afterwards, they would organize a script, take pictures, write and record a text, choose a background song and do the video presentation with Photostory©. This was a very personal project and the only guidelines given were the subject matter (their presentation) and that the film would have to be at least three minutes long. Results were very rewarding for all those involved, learners and educator. You can see an example of these videos in <http://secondsemester2010.pbworks.com/w/page/36643254/Tiago%20F%20and%20Carla%20P>. This will definitely be a task to be required to other classes since it allows integrating already acquired skills and a final product students may use in their future professional life (for a video CV or another academic assignment).

As far as the EILC group is concerned, students were asked to organize a diary of the course and/or their stay in Lisbon up to the end of the course. In the beginning of the course, the project was explained in detail and students were encouraged to take pictures of the various places they went, people they met and activities they experienced during the three weeks of the course; the Photostory© could also include reference of their journey to Portugal and of the days before the course began. The only compulsory photo was one taken during the walking tours in the city of Lisbon. Erasmus Intensive Language Courses encompass classroom as well as cultural activities and in our courses we usually include two walking tours around the city of Lisbon. (see <http://eilclisboasetembro2011.pbworks.com/w/page/45067594/A%20p%C3%A1gina%20do%20Maximilian>).

2.2. Animations using Dvolver©

An animation tool was also used with some EILC classes - Dvolver© - a website where you can make a cartoon comic strip type movie online using pre-made graphics (www.dvolver.com). As students had already attended about 40 hours of classes, we believed this would allow them to put in practice already acquired vocabulary and structures in Portuguese language while simultaneously having fun creating an imaginary story with strange characters and sets. The assignment was very simple - the comic strip would have to include 3 scenes, students could choose set, characters and script; educators would provide help in terms of vocabulary and structure but students were free not to call them - more than linguistic accuracy, our aim was to provide students with confidence in their acquired skills. As a result, the strips sometimes have language mistakes. At the end of the projects, students should upload their comic strips to the class wiki and should watch their colleagues' work and

comment on it. (Check http://s3.amazonaws.com/dv_assets/plot_template.swf?movie_id=517237 and <http://www.dvolver.com/live/movies-517281>)

2.3. Podcasts

Podcasts may be produced so as to allow students to hear themselves and others speak and thus analyze and correct mistakes in terms of pronunciation, for example. Moreover, they allow educators to produce listening comprehension exercises using either their own voice, the students' recordings or even other people's speech.

Students attending EILC at elementary level are required to record their personal introduction at the end of the first week of classes while students at intermediate level are asked to do it in the second day of classes. The objectives underlying the task are very different - intermediate level students are asked to do it so as to be able to correct pronunciation and improve their oral skills; elementary students are asked to record their presentation so as to gain confidence in their oral skills. This recording also marks a new stage in their learning curve - usually from this moment forward they speak much more in Portuguese and educators also start talking only in Portuguese (or mostly so) in class.

After writing and rehearsing their introductions, students would record their texts using Audacity© (free software for recording and editing) and then post the recordings on Podomatic© (a podcast hosting platform). A link was then posted on the class's blog of each of the recordings. In the following EILC, a few of these recordings were used for listening comprehension exercises for other EILC classes. Based on these and other recordings made with the same software, several interactive exercises were created on Quia (see 1.4) and made available on the elearning platform.

2.4. Interactive exercises

All language courses at our higher education institution have a Moodle page where interactive exercises and games are available to students, assignments are posted and uploaded and video presentations with grammar explanations, for example, are accessible and downloadable. Though initially the pages were a resource repository, they are now an increasingly important meeting point for both students and educators. Students attending first degrees have to do compulsory exercises and upload written assignments regularly on the platform and post-graduate students must post all their assignments in their specific page, just to mention two examples of the elearning platform for our course units. In the case of EILC, the Moodle page is part of the compulsory workload though students are encouraged to do the exercises mostly outside classroom sessions.

In the EILC page, students can find interactive exercises created with the tool HotPotatoes©

The Hot Potatoes suite includes six applications, enabling you to create interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and gap-fill exercises for the World Wide Web. Hot Potatoes is freeware, and you may use it for any purpose or project you like. It is not open-source. (tool description at <http://hotpot.uvic.ca/>)

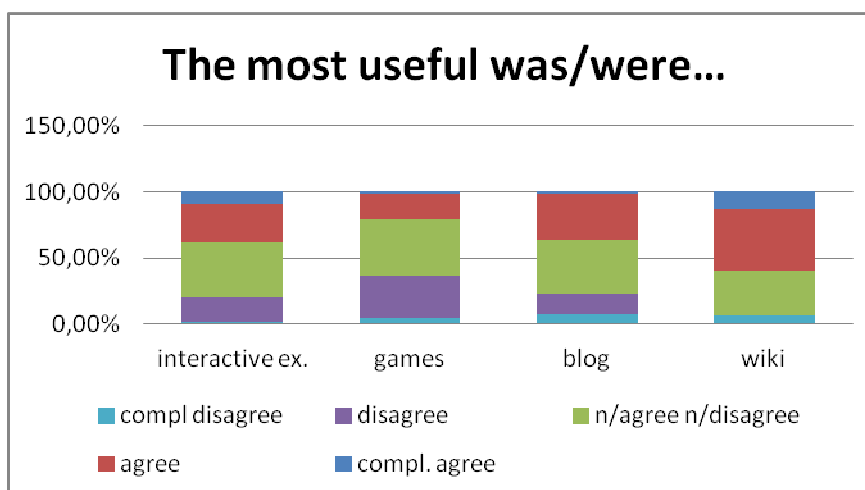
Besides this tool, there are several other exercises/games created using the tool Quia© (www.quia.com), which include games such as matching, hangman and scavenger hunts, as well as listening comprehension exercises and others similar to those created with HotPotatoes©. The main different between these two software is that Quia©, because it also provides a hosting service, allows for an easier use of image and sound files. This is due to the fact that exercises on Quia© are saved on Quia© and on Moodle there is a link to the exercises; with HotPotatoes©, the exercises is saved on Moodle itself and so the images and sounds must also be saved on Moodle, which is sometimes not possible due to institutional restraints in terms uploading and downloading files.

3. The survey

As mentioned earlier, in the academic year of 2010/2011 a survey was applied to all students learning languages at our university so as to assess the impact of the elearning platform, the different activities available there and the activities carried out in class using ICT tools on the students' learning experience. Most survey respondents (90%) acknowledged the relevant role the platform played in their learning experience (nearly 90% agreed that the “online experience boosted [their] learning” and more than 75% disagreed with the statement “The platform simplifies studying but has no effect in the overall learning experience”).

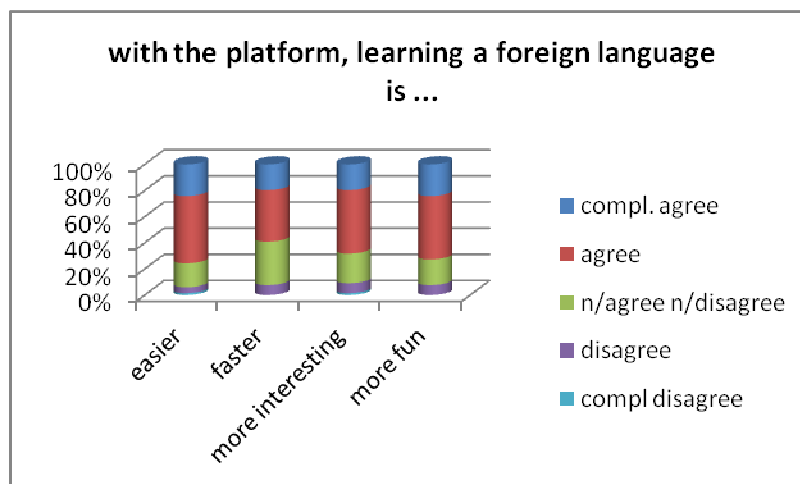
Though less than half the respondents (47.2%) declared they played online, most stated they use the Internet for learning. Among the several activities/resources/tools made available to them, respondents selected three (the interactive exercises, the blog and the wiki) as the most useful for their learning. The interactive exercises were viewed as very relevant but not the games, a result we believe is a consequence of students not yet considering games a learning tool.

Chart 1



Most importantly, as Chart 2 shows, the majority of respondents considered that with the platform and the tools used, “learning a foreign language becomes easier (72.6%), “faster” (64.8%), “more fun” (74.2%) and “more interesting” (66.8%). More than half the students selected the wiki as the most useful resource and the podcasts, the animations and the video presentations created with Voicethread© and/or Photostory© were placed on the class or project wiki.

Chart 2



In the present academic year, the Foreign Language team has focused on developing resources and exercises for English for Specific Purposes due to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, all undergraduate students at our university attend a semester of English. This year we started a new course – in Mandarin – and thus new exercises and activities are being developed for this language course. Finally, in the present project, Breaking Barriers, with Çukurova University, Turkey, we are for the first time using Facebook© as a meeting point for all those involved.

4. The future

Since 2006, when ICT was first introduced in the course units of foreign language, our goal has been to gradually improve and increase the resources made available to students, to try new tools and continuously assess the usefulness and impact these have on our students' learning. We aim to provide a more complete and shared learning experience to all those involved, one that encompasses fun but also learning results.

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Recebido em: 23/03/2012

Aceito em: 08/04/2012