

The future of language education in the light of Covid - lessons learned and ways forward

Case study on experiences of foreign language teaching during the Covid pandemic by
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- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language teaching experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

Who were the learners?

About 20 students aged 16 attending the 3rd grade of an Italian State High School

What were the aims of the session/lesson?

This teaching unit of English literature aimed at introducing the literary form of medieval ballads by comparing them to popular Italian and American folk/pop songs, which were then chosen by students and commented on to find out common themes and reflect on the use of language.

The aim was to have students use English, which is studied as a foreign language, to be able to appreciate artistic forms and then write some reflections in the form of a diary page or blog, adopting a different point of view.

Please write a brief description – the ‘story’ - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

The context was during a long period of lockdown between the end of 2020 and the first months of 2021. The main issue was involving students during online lessons, which were only 45 minutes long, making the most of digital media and ensuring language development.

The traditional focus on presentation-practice-production was made more flexible and interactive by encouraging them to use digital tools to communicate and produce project work.

After an initial presentation of some popular English medieval ballads (e.g. “Lord Randal” and “Geordie”) in the input phase, some activities such as comprehension, vocabulary work, discussion, followed. These all took place during online sessions and some work was assigned offline.

I wanted to involve students more by giving them the possibility to focus on the information gathered and to produce some relevant work both during and at the end of the teaching unit.

In order to integrate content and language (historical background of the period and literary texts), students were asked to write a blog post or a diary page online in which they had to imagine they were one of the characters, or even an object, from “Lord Randal”. They had to retell the story from their point of view in that role, giving reasons for their action (e.g. why did you kill your lover? Would you choose another ending? etc.). To do this they had to use an ICT tool (*Padlet*) and were also encouraged to add pictures, images, photos etc. to their diary/blog. The posts on “*Padlet*” were visible to everyone immediately and did not need any mediation by the teacher. It was like a live discussion in which everyone could comment, ask questions and receive feedback. The fact that everyone could read their classmates’ posts and also reply, ‘like’ them or add an emoticon was something very different from the traditional mode of delivery in class.

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In a follow up session they were asked to explain their choices in the organization of their work: the reason why they had used some images or paintings, the use of a particular word or phrase, etc. The chat column during online lessons also allowed everyone to comment or ask questions of both teacher and students.

What made this experience memorable was the students' enthusiasm and willingness to move from a kind of academic and traditional teaching unit based on literature to a task which required them to use their creativity. The result was outstanding both for the language competence shown (considering their language level) and the originality of their work. Students were happy to share and comment on their work during another online lesson.

The whole teaching unit was carried out through distance learning as Italy was in total lockdown. I wanted to make the lessons less boring and more interactive, abandoning the mode "teacher speaking -students listening" and encouraging them at the same time to use an ICT tool which made it possible to read and comment on each other's texts.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

The need to be more flexible, to show more flexibility when adopting and trying out different teaching methods and ICT tools as well; I have learned to adjust more to students' needs and learning styles. The prolonged distance lessons have encouraged me to allow more students' speaking time and be less directive.

I reflected a lot on the fact that, after such a long period of distance teaching, I did not notice in general that students' language competence had got worse or declined.

The use of the chat only in English during lessons, or even for short quizzes, the adoption of flipped learning/teaching, the regular production of audio files by students to comment on a reading passage, gradually became natural and involved most students.

B. In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues supported each other's professional practice during the pandemic?

Through a lot of Meet/Zoom calls we shared our doubts and difficulties. To be honest, there was not much real sharing of resources in my local context, I mostly took inspiration from reading articles or books about distance learning or from attending webinars/seminars online. As far as specific language teaching support is concerned, I attended several webinars through the pandemic and used social networks to stay in touch with other professionals and get relevant support.

C. The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?

I think I have become more flexible and ready to adapt to unexpected situations and issues. I have definitely acquired further teaching skills and used some ICT tools/app/software more than in the past. At the same time, I am appreciating even more the importance of face-to-face lessons and human contact (even teacher development) rather than working online.
