Online Classes in a Pandemic Context: A (re) Framing of Language Teaching?

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on social interaction and has forced schools to adapt to new realities. Teachers, who had previously only taught in face-to-face settings, were suddenly required to adopt and adjust to remote teaching due to pandemic restrictions. This article reflects on the experiences of foreign language teachers in different online teaching formats during this period. Theoretical foundations for this research include authors such as Bakhtin (2005, 2003), Machado and Abreu-Tardelli (2009), and Bronckart (1999). This exploratory and qualitative study utilized a structured questionnaire as a methodological approach (Gil, 2008). The aim of the survey was to gather information about the online teaching formats used by teachers and their self-evaluation of their teaching skills and knowledge during this time. The study found that a re-evaluation of teaching strategies was necessary, requiring the use of a broader range of pedagogical tools to achieve success in online teaching. The data generated indicated that a re-framing of teaching was necessary, compelling professional instrumentalization and appropriation of a wider range of pedagogical tools under the extreme circumstances that were faced.

Keywords: covid-19 pandemic, pedagogical view, remote classes, teacher literacy

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, the global pandemic has caused significant changes in various spheres of human interaction. As a result, schools have been required to adapt to the new reality. This necessitated significant effort and engagement from teachers who had previously only taught in face-to-face classrooms and were forced to accept and adopt distance classes. Although Distance Learning (DL) is not a new modality, this new classroom context, even when taught at a distance, has been experienced differently in many Brazilian schools.

Therefore, the ideas of Bakhtin (apud Brait, 2005) are relevant in this context, as he argues that our communicative spheres are in constant motion and shaped by contact. The sudden shift to remote teaching required face-to-face classes to interact with digital platforms and artifacts, necessitating adaptation to a new context. In this new class model, teachers, as mediators of knowledge, needed to seek ways to meet the new demands of the world reality. As Clot (2007, p. 237) notes, "responding to the demands of reality continues to be, without a doubt, what is most human in a man." To meet the needs of the pandemic reality, instructors, even those with limited digital literacy, had to immerse themselves in this new universe to enable the development of classes.

This study focuses on foreign language classes, specifically English and French, which in Brazil, were traditionally taught in-person until mid-March 2020 when they had to quickly transition to online instruction through digital platforms. This research aims to examine how these online classes were implemented, how teachers perceived their own teaching, how they categorized their online teaching approach, and whether they felt comfortable and competent in this new format at the time of the study.

In order to conduct this investigation, a questionnaire was created to gather data from language teachers, particularly those teaching English and French, who had to suddenly shift from in-person to online classes due to the pandemic. We analyzed their responses to understand how they perceive and categorize their online class formats and compared these with relevant literature in the field.

In terms of analysis, we adopted Bronckart's (1999) three-layered approach to text organization, which includes the general infrastructure of the text, mechanisms of textualization, and enunciative mechanisms. For this study, we focused on the layer of enunciative mechanisms, as we were interested in understanding the perspectives of the teachers and how they evaluated their classes during the pandemic. By examining their voices, we aimed to gain insights into how they adapted to the new teaching context following the lockdown and school closures. Further details on our theoretical framework are provided in the literature review section, as follows.

2. Literature Review

Language is a fundamental element of this study, which is focused on the teaching and learning of foreign languages. We recognize that proficiency in a language allows for full participation and the sharing of ideas and beliefs. The positions of the teachers regarding their classes constitute the corpus of our research. As previously stated, we analyzed the

participants' discourse using the framework of Sociodiscursive Interactionism, specifically adopting the concept of textual organization developed by Bronckart (1999).

From a theoretical standpoint, Bronckart's (1999) conceptualization of a text as comprising **three interrelated layers** provides a useful framework for the analysis of the speech of language teachers. The first layer is the **general infrastructure** of the text, which includes the genre, extension, and nature of the content. The second layer is the **mechanisms of textualization**, which are responsible for establishing relations of continuity, rupture, or contrast within the text. Finally, the third layer is the **enunciative mechanisms**, which consist of the positions, voices, judgments, feelings, and opinions of the authors.

As this study focuses on analyzing the enunciative mechanisms of language teachers, our goal is to understand their opinions and judgments regarding the formats of their classes online. Specifically, we aim to explore the ways in which language teachers in João Pessoa, a city in the state of Paraíba, Brazil, categorize and understand the classes they taught online during the pandemic. Given the urgency and need to transition quickly from in-person to online classes, the pedagogical aspect of the transition was often overlooked. As such, most classes were delivered remotely over the internet, which is the focus of this research.

In a nutshell, the present study is anchored in Sociodiscursive Interactionism and seeks to analyze the speech of language teachers regarding their online classes using Bronckart's conceptualization of a text as comprising three interrelated layers. The study takes place in the specific context of João Pessoa, where schools had to transition quickly from in-person to remote classes due to the pandemic.

It is important to point out that the remote format of most of the classes that have taken place since the beginning of the pandemic is different from the DL format, although both are delivered online, they take place in very different ways. The Ministry of Education website defines DL as follows:

> Distance Learning is the educational modality in which the didactic-pedagogical mediation in the teaching and learning processes occurs with the use of means and information and communication technologies, with students and teachers developing educational activities in different places or times.

It is assumed, however, that the specificities of DL presuppose a proactive and independent behavior on the part of the students and, it is believed that for this reason, until then, this was not a very suitable modality for regular basic education, since, at this stage, there is a great dependence on the teacher to deliver content. What schools ended up trying to implement was maintaining the way of teaching before the pandemic, but this time mediated by technological artifacts. Whether through synchronous or asynchronous classes.

Adapting to the remote model was sometimes a question that essentially involved teachers and hours of work and study. They needed, in a short time, to become proficient in platforms, mostly, never used before. Furthermore, they had to deal with their own anxieties, often without understanding exactly what model of class they were teaching. This "new" class model came full of possibilities, however, as we mentioned, still unknown by many teachers.

For some teachers, these skills with technologies and online classes were not part of their métier until before the pandemic.

The undergraduate courses in foreign languages themselves did not, so far, address this format of classes in their didactics subjects or even in internship practices. From the foregoing, we can point out that remote classes were not part of the prescription of the teacher who, until March 2020, taught only face-to-face classes. From this perspective, Machado and Abreu-Tardelli (2009) point out that a worker receives from the social environment the tools he needs to work, however, these only become true work tools when the professional takes possession of these artifacts:

> So that the worker can carry out his activity, the social environment makes available to him what we can call socio-historically constructed 'artifacts', both material (a hammer, for example) and symbolic, including the prescriptions themselves. oral or written. However, these 'artifacts' could only be constituted as true 'tools' for the worker, when he considers them really useful, appropriating them, 'by himself and for himself'. (Machado & Abreu-Tardelli, 2009, p. 105).

Thus, it is inferred that, given the urgency of adapting the new artifacts, which became mandatory due to the pandemic, the time required for teachers to appropriate them was very short or even non-existent. In this sense, it is up to us to reflect on the different formats of classes taught by the foreign language teachers in question and on experiences they had during this period. To this end, we outline a methodological course as follows.

3. Method

This study is a field survey of the survey type (Gil, 2008), which is exploratory and qualitative in nature, aiming to analyze the variables present in the teachers' understanding of the classes taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gil (2008) emphasizes that surveys provide direct knowledge of reality, as individuals themselves express their conceptions about the situation.

As a research instrument, we selected a questionnaire comprising eleven questions, which aimed to facilitate the verbalization of how the teachers perceive their classes, in light of the current context of social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Following its preparation, the questionnaire was made available through Google Forms, and the volunteers accessed the link through social networks. Over the two-week period during which it was available, we obtained fourteen responses, all from foreign language teachers. It is noteworthy that the questionnaire was administered in January 2021, after these teachers had already conducted remote classes for almost a year, lending greater legitimacy to the responses.

The questionnaire employed objective questions, which allowed for only one response option, dependent questions that required participants to respond based on their answers to previous questions, and subjective questions that provided an opportunity for the expression of unplanned personal and subjective considerations during the conception of the theme and/or research hypotheses.

In this sense, Gil (2008) defines a questionnaire as an "investigation technique consisting of a set of questions that are submitted to people with the purpose of obtaining information" (p. 121). For the author, they are proposed mostly in writing and answered autonomously.

There was a notable degree of subjectivity present in the results, stemming from both the nature of the research method, namely the survey, and the research instrument, which was the questionnaire that contained subjective questions. Despite this subjectivity, we analyzed the findings through the lens of Socio-discursive Interactionism as described by Bronckart (1999), and these findings are detailed in the subsequent section.

4. Results

As mentioned earlier, a questionnaire was designed to investigate how foreign language teachers understand the format of the classes they have been teaching during this pandemic year. In this session we will present the profile of the teachers participating in the research and analyze shared responses. We obtained fourteen responses: one French teacher and thirteen English teachers. The teachers work in language courses, and/or in public and private elementary schools. Some also had private classes with one or a small group of students, even before the pandemic. For 85.7% of the instructors participating in our survey, their classes only took place in face-to-face format, in other words, most had never given online classes.

We present below the graphs taken from the questionnaire, in order to support the information shared here. As for teacher training, it was found that most have a degree in Literature, as shown in Figure 1:
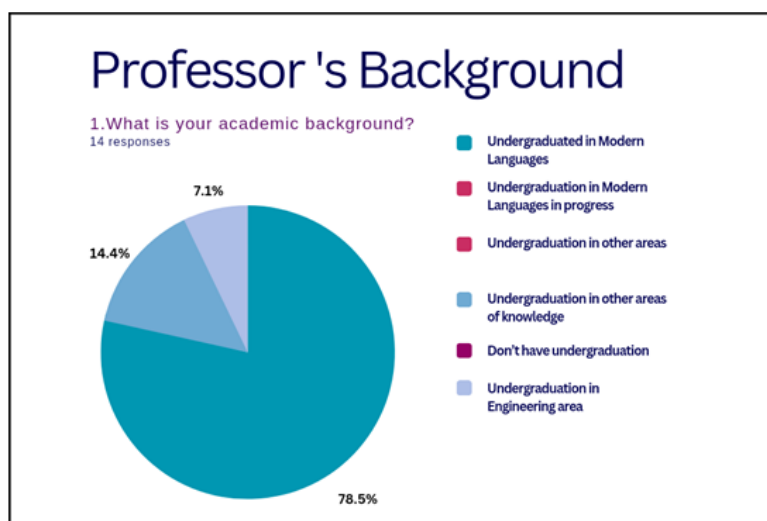

Figure 1. Professor's background

Source: Research Data, 2021.

We move on to Figure 2, which shows the places where the participants teach. Although it was

answered by only fourteen people, twenty-two workplaces were indicated. This information is relevant as it reveals that some of the participants have more than one work environment. It is also noticed that most respondents teach in language schools (64.4%) followed by regular schools (50%), as shown in the graph below:

Figure 2. Workplace

Source: Dados da pesquisa, 2021.

With regard to the format of the classes, it was found that only two teachers (14.3%) had previously taught online classes. With this information in hand, it is possible to infer that the majority had to learn to proactively deal with artifacts that had never been used in their professional lives. This data is extremely important for this analysis, as it fits these participants into a group of professionals who have gone through or have gone through a conflicting process to adapt to new teaching demands/prescriptions. According to Machado and Abreu-Tardelli (2009, p. 106) this conflict can lead the professional to two paths, that of teaching development or the impossibility of teaching.

At the core of this issue is the academic training of teachers. If it is true that the pandemic was not something programmed, it is also a fact that Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICT) are already part of people's lives, in general, but still did not find space in classrooms.

The following open questions sought answers on how participants see or classify their classes. Four questions will be addressed here, two of them exclusive to those who already taught online classes, the others for all those who contributed to the research. The elaboration of these questions was particularly challenging, as there was the possibility of a multiple-choice question with the insertion of the "online classes" option already available. However, as the objective of this survey was to listen to the teacher's voice and find out how he understands and evaluates his classes, the choice was not to provide any information about the types of classes

that were discussed throughout this work. This part of the analysis was divided into two sections, namely: teachers with online experience prior to the pandemic and teachers without online experience prior to the pandemic.

4.1 Teachers with Previous Online Experience

We start with the questions answered by teachers who affirmed having previous experience with online format before the Covid-19 restrictions (Note 1).

If you answered yes to the previous question, how would you classify / define the type of classes you teach?

(1) Synchronous Classes

(2) Conversation classes Only to train students for future job interviews that would take place in English.

(3) What do you mean, type of class? Good, Bad? Remote, DL? I didn't get it. But They were adapted to remote classes. I consider them good.

In answer (1), shared by one of the teachers, we noticed a more scientifically in-depth knowledge about the genres of online classes. We make this interpretation because the professor brings the technical terminology of the type of remote class he teaches. About the full domain of the genres of a certain domain, Bakhtin (2003) considers that it reflects on the way we represent ourselves socially in that specific context.

> The better we master genres, the more freely we use them, the more fully and clearly we discover our individuality in them (where this is possible and necessary), the more flexibly and subtly we reflect the unique situation of communication; in short, we realized our free project of discourse in a more complete way (p. 285).

Answer (3) reveals an understanding similar to (1). Despite reporting a lack of comprehension of the question, the participant lists examples of online class formats using scientific terminology and not explaining, individually, the way he presents the answer, the teacher demonstrates understanding that there are differences in the listed examples. The second answer brings the classification "conversation class", there is a specification of the class, however not referring to the online modality.

If you answered yes for the previous question, describe how your classes took place.

(4) In communication platforms through Internet,

(5) Via Skype. With 60-minute duration.

(6) They were remote classes. We got on the platform at class time and went on. I adapted what was necessary, as the book was less used. We use a lot of online games so that the students do not disperse.

The three answers reveal that classes took place in a synchronous remote format and complement the feedback we obtained in the previous question. (4) completes how the

synchronous classes took place, (5) makes it clear that the classes were also remote and synchronous, the platform used, in the context of the class, only allows this type of interaction. Answer (6) also makes it clear that the classes took place in the synchronous remote format, the participant even gives details of the pedagogical planning and demonstrates a concern to keep students attentive to the class.

4.2 Teachers Without Previous Online Experience

The following questions were addressed to all participants in the survey about classes taught *during the lockdown*.

How would you classify/define the type of classes you teach during the pandemic times?

(7) Classes maintained a communicative approach, but now with different resources.

(8) Some techniques were left out, such as monitoring students closely while carrying out activities in the classroom.

(9) Remote classes

(10) Synchronous and asynchronous.

(11) Live online classes

(12) Language class

(13) They are at an expected level and adapted to the situation, but I know that we lose in s-s interaction, as well as in speaking issues.

(14) Intense and with many more resources (online games, videos, forms, etc.) for teaching the 4 skills with different focuses.

(15) Remote and good. I hope this is what you want to know.

(16) Private English lessons

(17) Challenging, innovative, mutual learning (student - teacher)

(18) Very good, according to students and parents.

(19) Classes were recorded and made available to parents

Answers (9), (10), (11) and (15) bring the terminology of online class genres, as we mentioned in the initial part of this analysis, the presence of these words leads us to believe that there is on the part of these participants a mastery, academic, greater than their classes. Other important aspects to be pointed out about the teachers' sharing are:

- Answers (1), (4) and (9) were from the same professor, that is, this professional had already taught online classes and once again demonstrates that he is knowledgeable about the terminologies of this type of classes.

- Answers (13) and (14) reveal a concern with teaching in this "new" class format.

- The teacher who shared the answer (19), even without using scientific terminology, ends up describing his classes and makes it clear that his classes have two formats, remote synchronous and asynchronous.

- In (7), (8) and (13), teachers identify some changes that they perceive to have occurred in their classes when migrating from face-to-face to remote format, such as the use of new tools, the absence of monitoring, and the decrease of interaction between students.

Describe the way your online classes happened during the pandemic.

(20) Private lessons in the one-to-one model flow smoothly, using materials and resources shared on the screen. With classes of children, much needs to be adapted, so that students do not lose interest

(21) Classes took place in a virtual classroom, using a platform

(22) Weekly, on alternate days and times depending on the class and student level and on Internet communication platforms that allow instant messaging, video calls, screen sharing, etc. The ones I used the most - and still do - were Hangout, Skype and Whereby.

(23) At the agreed time, the student enters the meeting and the class takes place in real time, online.

(24) Through the zoom

(25) I try to structure the classes in such a way that the students are able to work at least two skills in each class. Most of the times they are T-S, but I try to put tasks that challenge students at least 1x a week, and they need to make an oral presentation of their results.

(26) Google Meet, 2x a week for 50 minutes each time.

(27) They were remote classes. We entered the platform at class time and followed. I adapted what was necessary, as the book was less used. We use a lot of online games so that the students don't disperse. Even so, there were days of great participation and days with less participation and involvement of the students.

(28) The private system forces the teacher to focus on the book, and so it was done! Using the digital book to present to the students, the teacher explained and solved the questions together with the students until the material was completed.

(29) My classes are all about interacting with students, always trying to keep them attentive to classes, asking questions for them to answer during classes, with slides and very dynamic exercises.

As previously, the answers to the ninth question complement what was shared in the eighth. The following reflections were made on the answers given to the question of how the instructors taught their classes, starting with the use of the word platform in the answers, as in (20), (21) and (21). Furthermore, we also analyzed that (20) and (22) point out some resources they use in their classes, once again here we see a full mastery of this type of class. (20)

Reflects on the challenge of keeping children's attention. As in (27), which considers that student engagement is not always satisfactory in online classes. Answer (29) also brings this concern about how to keep students focused on class. (23), (24), (26) mention examples of platforms. Answer (25) reveals a concern to work on students' skills and learning. Demonstrates knowledge of the terminologies and format of foreign language classes.

5. Conclusion

The pursuit of professional development has become a crucial aspect of teachers' daily routines, especially given the constant emergence of various technological innovations. Consequently, the need for digital literacy was already a pre-existing condition, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. However, the shift to remote teaching, driven by public health concerns, has accelerated the mandatory adoption of new tools and artifacts that are now considered essential for foreign language teachers to carry out their duties.

Thus, Kersch and Rabello (2016) state that teachers are mediators of knowledge and everyone's participation in the learning process. For the authors, the search for other ways of teaching must be constantly faced.

> To be a literacy agent, in our view, is to be a mediator, it is to encourage the participation of everyone involved in the process, it is to test other ways of teaching and, above all, to also allow yourself to learn. In addition, the literacy agent must know how to deal with multiple literacies, due to the linguistic, cultural and social diversity that characterize the classroom today (p. 51).

From the answers given, it is understood that in the group of participating teachers, even the majority claiming that they had no experience with online classes prior to the pandemic, we can identify positions that express this concern in being this teacher mediator and literacy agent. Answers (22), (27) and (29) are examples of this teacher concerned about feeling comfortable and mastering the format of online classes, that is, becoming literate in that context, so that they could make their classes a moment productive in order to provide its students with all possible learning possibilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly brought significant transformations to education, which may potentially affect future teaching models, as observed even after the offer and resumption of 100% face-to-face classes. The results of this research reveal that the redefinition of pedagogical work has been guiding teaching concerns, following the double path identified by Machado and Abreu-Tardelli (2009) towards professional development. The state of emergency imposed by health issues has accelerated the inclusion of digital information and communication technologies (DICTs) in classrooms. The way teachers have dealt with and continue to face this obligation, seeking to relearn how to teach with the support of various tools and artifacts, shows that teaching and learning methods are undoubtedly changing to meet the demands of the new generations of students. These students are potentially using screens to study, whether simultaneously or not, individually or collectively, conditioned to different objectives and teaching proposals, as face-to-face classes resume.

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Notes

Note 1. All the answers shared here are exactly as they were shared in the questionnaire, spelling errors, abbreviations or any other inadequacy to the cultural norm are authored by the respondents.

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