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SWITCHING TO E-LEARNING IN PANDEMIC COLOMBIA AND OVERCOMING CHALLENGES OF MEANINGFUL EVALUATION

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Abstract

In this paper I seek to lay out how I jumped online at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools abruptly closed, how I processed the flood of new technologies that availed themselves to teachers, and how I developed a teaching method that was manageable, adopting a new approach for putting students at the center of learning their second language. Faced with the problems of reduced connectedness and immersiveness, the model of the class needed to be modified. Using new evaluative techniques better suited for E-learning, and adjusting the presentation of class content based on principals of cognitive load and universal design theory, I sought to give my students an experience akin to being in an in-person ESL classroom - one that required their input and collaboration.

Keywords: communicative method, cognitive load, E-learning, pinch points, scribing, universal design for learning.

In February of 2020 we were thrown head first into virtual classes. We were presented with an array of tuturials and learned today's household terms of Zoom, Google Meets, Teams, and a host of fly-by-night apps, each with a different user interface, nameless (and often for me senseless) icons and menu names. Google Drive had always been "there", but now it was central to our work. It was a mad dash to figure out how to hold a class, let alone evaluate the language skills. The main problem was establishing a rapport online in this new environment. Any sense of immersion was seemingly lost and in those apps it was easy to lose a sense of authenticity. The noises were new. There were barking dogs, stereo systems, babies and neighborhood traffic from across Colombia coming through my headphones. The drawbacks were instantly apparent, and chiefly among them was connectivity. Students would appear and disappear, or their

transmission sounded like it was coming from a distant galaxy. The "call" would drop without me knowing, and I'd spend minutes talking into a void before employing the now everyday language of the online class: "Can you hear me?". If my internet failed, it would mean racing off to a friend's house or an internet cafe to salvage what I could of our class. This feeling of lack of immersion put a fair deal of pressure on me, added to the sense that my home was now my workplace. Immersion at least requires eye contact and verbal timing, which is to say taking turns speaking, signalling who is about to speak, speaking at the right moment to provide feedback and corrections. Verbal cues like, "Uh-huh" would land a second too late, resulting in a pregnant pause and an interruption as the student continued to speak. The challenges were endless, presented a steep learning curve for someone who had never hosted a video conference call or conducted an exam online. Some initially promising online tools like interactive whiteboards just didn't work. Some apps were great for a specific purpose, but that meant managing an ever-expanding slate of browser tabs, log-in accounts, downloads and varying degrees of functionality. What we needed was a line-up of proven and dependable methods - something to tamp down the chaotic nature of the early classes of the pandemic, and try to then create a semblance of immersion again. The problem created by latency, that half-second delay in transmission, caused unwanted interruptions and overlapping speech - and as a teacher steeped in the tenet of never interrupting a student, it felt unpardonable. Lurking was another issue - those students whose names appeared but who never participated or answered when called on, posed the question, "Are you really there?"

As our starting point, Microsoft Word was a medium that enabled the display of teacher-controlled text, Kahoot! was a handy tool for competitions, the Miro app or Jamboard for interactive writing, Playposit and Socrative

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for testing, WhatsApp and Google Drive for sharing information, and Google Translate, Google image search, YouTube, university platforms, and basically the entire internet.

The 5th industrial revolution was heralded, and videos of choirs on Zoom went viral that Christmas. The technology seemed God-like, and humans being humans got us big laughs: people forgetting to turn off their mics and cameras, or a screaming toddler crashing a broadcasted interview. The pressure was on to create a personna of perfection not only out of ourselves, but our homes. A limited variety of fake backgrounds made it look like several students were studying in identical living rooms. Teachers were turned into producers and classes required the skills of a show runner.

As burnout ensued, the verneer wore off. In one of the most honest reveals of the pandemic era, Zoom choirs were shown to be nearly impossible to pull off without several hours' work of a skilled sound technician.

The evaluation I'm discussing here is communicative, and is separate from quizzes or exams. It is the evaluation of an entire class's ability to converse in the second language and it is used to guage general strengths and weaknesses, fluency levels, interactive abilities and dynamic.

Evaluating a class of mixed-level students requires open and free chit-chat, a give and take of students' contributing to a thematic warm-up. Using the communicative method, a teacher identifies pinch points, those common errors, either fossilized through repeated misuse, or mistranslated from the students' mother tongue, and then works to resolve them. This is only achieved by direct communication between class and teacher, and not through lectures, pre-recorded videos or other passive learning techniques. The second

language teacher is a coach who is practicing with, and facilitating a student's developing language production ability. Seeking a method to record and display the hectic flow of communication in a document to be studied and edited, I began to transcribe large parts of the classes, becoming a sort of stenographer to my students.

Transferring out of the traditional classroom to a shared-screen Word document presented itself as the best solution. I sought to present to them visually what they had used to learn before: the written word! Using big, bold fonts, We proceeded to create a magazine out of our class, incorporating different colored text and emojis. I could drag pictures and diagrams into it, paste links to every resource they needed, and switch tabs to share audio and video. It meant trancribing the student's language, typing exactly what they spoke.. in other words, scribing.

Scribing has been documented as a method in primary education. As an evaluative method, scribing allowed students to recall exactly what they had said and to identify errors. Live scribing solved the problem of latency. Common errors and fossilized ones could be addressed and afforded a comparative look at language differences such as cognates and the order of words. It meant student's words in class had an impact, as they contributed to the body of class notes they would all be receiving. It also evidenced the students' degree of participation in the evaluative speaking activities. And so, I set out to type what my students spoke, as they spoke. It was personal, easy to focus on, and provided a record to be corrected, reworded, used as an example and scaffold as student participation grew. Scribing often took the form of inquiry, as students and teacher traded questions and answers, students used templates to produce dialogues, and interrogative structures were analyzed in written and oral form. Scribing on an inquiry level allowed for students to work at their own level. With scribing as

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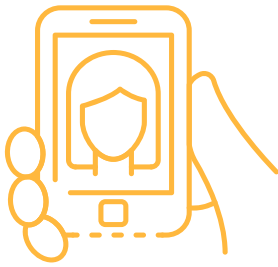
scaffolding, inquiry deepened classroom discussions. For researcher Moses and educators Busetti-Frevert and Pritchard, " we slowly saw the students' inquiries blossom. Every day, we were amazed by the growth the students showed in their ability to question and inquire about the world around them."

Certainly, a class cannot consist only of printed words on a screen. The risk of cognitive overload presented by the wide variety of apps and websites in the early stages of e-learning, is just as great by a lack of variety in instruction. Mayer's theory of cognitive load suggests that our mental processes function on different channels, namely auditory and visual. Students need a blend of written and narrated language, with regular breaks. The question is, how often do they need these breaks or medium switches, and how long can we, as a class, stay focused on our transcribed conversations? I don't believe there is a precise answer, but instead the teacher, with constant awareness, simply must "read the room".

In Bonk and Zhang's R2D2: Read, reflect, display and do, the class spans four components.

Reading exercises include student /teacher generated documents, interactive worksheets like Liveworksheets, and realia (schedules, adverts., menus, etc.) There is time for individual tasks: similar to the flipped classroom, students view content outside of class and do their homework in class. Students then take in the language through videos, animations and pictures, listening for gist and some details. Finally, there are real-time collaborative tasks, such as group work, dialogues and student presentations.

ICTs are incorporated in ways not to cause cognitive overload (wide variety of apps, websites - passwords, usernames, different icons, jargon, jarring colors and

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sounds). The goal is to facilitate concentration and learning with a blend of visual and auditory resources, without excessive extraneous stimuli.

Students are allowed to work at their own pace, to their own level, in their own area of interest.

Universal Design principals were incorporated into the method of scribing in order to maximize this method's efficacy. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that increases accessibility and student success by reducing barriers and by providing learning environments that are responsive to the diverse needs of learners. The UDL framework assists university teachers in the design and delivery of course content and is based on the idea that there is no such thing as an average or typical learner. Having a framework that considers wide differences in learning styles and student needs and teaches to every learner is, now more than ever, essential. UDL is based on neuroscience and three main principles: providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. Practically, this framework has been useful for me as an ESL teacher in the modification of teaching materials and approaches, in the ways that I seek to support student engagement, and in the ways that I approach student feedback and evaluation.

These principals of accessibility aim to facilitate atypical, disabled or differently-abled students. During the pandemic, a poor internet connection became a disability. UDL's goal is that as few students as possible need to ask for special accomodations for learning. That is why in classroom transcriptions, text needs to be clear, well-organized, and resources easily available. Hyperlinks, tables and pictures must be incorporated.

In Zufic and Kalpic's study, color's effect on memorization was tested. Volunteers took a series of memory quizzes printed on different colored backgrounds and typefaces.
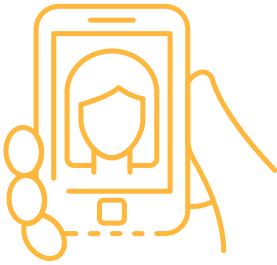
> These principals of accessibility aim to facilitate atypical, disabled or differently-abled students. During the pandemic, a poor internet connection became a disability.

There was a substantial difference in performance. People scored higher in a quiz with a light-yellow background and black typeface. Sans serif fonts, those without embellishment, such as Verdana and Arial, were similarly shown to benefit memorization. Therefore, key words in the transcript appear bold, black sans serif and highlighted in yellow.

UDL aslo stresses giving options for students in presenting their skills. While flexibility is crucial, a writing task cannot become a drawing task, and a speaking task cannot be interpretive dance (for example). The four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening must be tested and evidenced, and questions remain as to how. Video projects, pair work, reflective work and in-class assignments all aim to be diverse and and as flexible as possible for students.

In addition, the second language must be alive - that is to say, relevant. The "why" of learning becomes a constant, nagging factor. Students are taught everyday language in context, and allowed to reflect on how the language could be used in different contexts. Students are required to come up with their own examples, and their assignments are required to be personalized, with an emphasis on critical thinking.

Our preparedness as teachers varied depending on our previous knowledge of technology and the timeframe for adapting to a complete e-learning environment took classroom educators off guard. Within foreign language courses there was a breakdown in immersiveness that led to the need for a new approach. ESL classes had been geared toward student-centered, communicative methods before the pandemic, but the switch to virtual threw that tradition off-balance. A sizable portion of students lacked access to dependable, high-speed internet. There were always those students

> Students are taught everyday language in context, and allowed to reflect on how the language could be used in different contexts.

who "lurked" in class, or seemed to be lurking but in fact had connection difficulties, and a teacher was plagued by broken, uneven signals, both incoming and outgoing. We learned that choir practice on Zoom was not as easy as it had been presented. It was pretty impossible, in fact, thanks to latency. With a shift toward reflecting and doing, evaluation became more project-based while instruction replicated the white board in a way that was less interactive but served the students in recording their questions and doubts as well as their pronouncements and ideas. Once students knew on what level their participation would impact the class, they grew accustomed to taking part in the activities. Once I adjusted my timing, to not interrupt the students, to allow for pauses, to count down from 10, to take it easy when connections were lost, the classes, now in their third semester of being online, have developed into a more pared-down experience, with a greater amount of focus on a smaller number of platforms. We have settled into a routine in which students have checklists to follow and expectations of what a communication class requires of them. From feeling over our heads, we've creatively simplified the e-learning environment, humanizing it in ways still may not match the in-person learning environment, but invite everyone in.

Example of an identified pinch point: the negative verb with auxiliary "do", in the context of a practice conversation regarding quantity (how much / how many). After defining the pinch point, the class is offered a targeted activity to address it.

How many cats do you have?

I ~~no~~ have cats. I don´t have cats

Aff	Neg	Int
I have cats.	I don´t have cats.	Do you have cats?
Game: Ask a question: 1 point per negative answer. (with "do") Example: Do yo live on the moon? No, I don´t.		

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