3.4 USING TEXTS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE ONLINE CLASSROOM:
THE CASE OF UNIVERSIDADE ABERTA (PORTUGAL)
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Abstract

At Universidade Aberta, Portugal's unique distance learning university, undergraduate degrees include foreign language courses in German, Spanish, French and English (A1 – C1). These are taught entirely online through a learning platform (Moodle) which includes tools and resources teachers may use in their classes. In our experience of e-learning, we have been engaged in exploring how to effectively teach language skills online resorting to the latest technology at hand. Since the onset of Covid, however, we have been faced with an even greater challenge: to reach further in our standards of innovation and reference in the field of distance and online learning in Portugal, and that means working collaboratively to develop new and creative methodologies that will help students to acquire, not only the necessary language skills, but also communicative and collaborative competences in a world undergoing many transformations.

In this paper we focus on the use of texts in language teaching online and on how, because of Covid, the teaching-learning process has had to further reinvent itself, even at a University already designed to teach at a distance. To illustrate our ideas, we refer to examples of texts taught in the four languages, on the tools and resources used to create learning materials, their application in the foreign language virtual classroom and on the importance of using texts in language teaching.

Keywords: e-learning; foreign languages; language skills; learning resources; digital tools; teaching with texts.

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Introduction

"The text is central to any act of linguistic communication, the external, objective link between producer and receiver, whether they are communicating face to face or at a distance." (CEFR 2001, 98)

Anne Ediger states that "reading is probably the most important skill for second language (L2) learners in academic contexts" (2021, 153). It is also one of the most challenging skills to teach in the online foreign language classroom, when teaching is done at a distance and asynchronously.

However, when the most appropriate teaching strategies are developed for a specific group of students and their learning context, then, reading texts and using them for different language activities has proved to help in the acquisition of other language skills and knowledge, even in e-learning. Teaching through and with texts involves development of all the language skills, since when a text is used in the class, students practice their reading, speaking and pronunciation (reading out loud), writing and grammar, as well as increase their range of vocabulary. Furthermore, other competencies are also developed, since reading involves understanding of language and symbols, interpretation, which is also based on the reader's socio-cultural background, and the acquisition and application of different types of knowledge (Ediger, 2001). "The ability to read - taking general comprehension as the example - requires that the reader draw information from a text and combine it with information and expectations that the reader already has" (Weinstein 2001, 188).

There are many different types of texts that can be used in the Foreign Language classroom from longer to shorter pieces, fiction and nonfiction. Examples of texts which are used in the language classroom include excerpts from novels, short stories, poems, plays, newspaper or magazine articles, interviews, blogs, reviews, websites, reports, letters, recipes and menus, diaries, jokes, messages, along with many others also available on the internet today. But there are also other types of 'texts' which may be used in the foreign language classroom which include a combination of images, signs and written language such as comics or graphic novels, maps, schedules, ads, forms, etc. Texts can be used to explore all kinds of subjects, from more scientific to more literary

or artistic, or more trivial, and there are numerous activities which can be done with the text as a starting point, and which will help students develop every one of the language skills. The selection of teaching materials will always answer a pedagogical criterion as well as take into account the student's foreign language level.

We believe that, ideally, in the second language classroom, texts should be short since "short texts provide opportunity to focus in detail on aspects of reading (nominal and pronominals, direct references, allusion, imagery, inference making, use of schemata), listening and speaking, vocabulary, grammar and even writing skills in ways that a full-length text may not" (Kembo 2016, 2736). In a foreign language classroom in a school, university or other, students can perform different class, group or individual activities using a text. The teacher is also always present to correct pronunciation, to help with any vocabulary which is not clear, and to work on interpretation and analysis with the students. In distance and online learning, working with texts, whether as reading practice, to do vocabulary activities, comprehension or interpretation of characters and events, the teacher has to not only work with students to understand language and content, but also explore different strategies and the most adequate tools for teaching reading online. Fortunately, nowadays there are a number of content development apps and tools such as learning platforms, online quizzes, audio and video recording tools, presentation tools, social media, blogs and many others which aid in the development of teaching-learning materials to be used online.

Before we continue, we would like to provide some background on our teaching context. Universidade Aberta is the 'youngest' of Portuguese public universities. Founded in 1988, its aim was to make learning opportunities available to mature students (over 21) in Portugal and to the Portuguese speaking communities spread around the globe. This institute of higher education has undergraduate and graduate courses (Masters and PhD) as well as a school of continuous education, and operates at a distance, and entirely online since 2008. There are four foreign languages, English, French, German and Spanish, on offer for undergraduates who must do 1, 2 or more compulsory language courses over 4 or 6 semesters, depending on the degree they are enrolled in.

Teaching is based on the University Virtual Pedagogical Model[1] through which the principles of distance learning online are defined, and by which teachers and students must abide. All courses in the degrees (undergraduate, masters and doctorate) are delivered through the learning platform Moodle, which teachers, students and non-teaching staff have access to. In the case of the foreign languages, there are 6 levels (German: A1.1 - A2-B1; French and Spanish A1.2 - B2 and English B1.1 - C1.2) and students are enrolled in classes of 25 depending on their level. The courses follow a study guide which students have access to at the beginning of each semester, where the objectives, the program, resources, assessment and calendar are outlined in detail. Moodle has a number of internal and external resources and tools (forum, quizzes, podcasts, lessons, workshops, glossaries, wiki, H5P[2] activities) which can be used to upload and create activities and teachers complement their teaching program with different interactive and collaborative tasks.

During the pandemic, as we all know, most, if not all institutions worldwide had to readjust their methodologies to online teaching at record speed. And even at Universidade Aberta, whose learning system and methodologies were already entirely based on an e-learning distance model, a number of academic and administrative procedures had to be adapted to the reality of lockdown and social distancing. Exams, which had been previously administered at the University, were moved to online, for example. The result was that an already established distance and online learning university was faced with the challenge of proving the effectiveness of its virtual model and methodologies within a new educational paradigm, where many comparisons were being made and new competitors were arising.

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[1] Mendes, António. Q; Bastos, Glória; Amante, Lucia; Aires, Luísa & Cardoso, Teresa. *Modelo pedagógico virtual: cenários de desenvolvimento*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, 2018.
Pereira, A; Mendes, A. Q; Morgado, Lina; Amante, Lúcia; Bidarra, José. *Modelo Pedagógico Virtual da Universidade Aberta – Para uma Universidade do Futuro*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, 2007. ISBN 978-972-674-493-1

[2] H5P is a plugin which can be added to Moodle which allows for the creation of different learning content including quizzes, presentations and other interactive activities.

In the field of language learning at a higher level, Universidade Aberta is unique in Portugal since it was the only university to teach languages online. However, due to the pandemic, we were made to reflect on our methods and strategies and look for ways to innovate and remain as a reference in this field of learning, and in our case, in the teaching of foreign languages online. In sum, in this paper we are going to discuss the use of texts in language teaching and demonstrate, through sample activities done with classes in 2020-2021, how we used texts in our online foreign language classrooms keeping to our learning objectives and focusing on innovative and technological methodologies that strengthen our e-learning model.

The use of texts in the foreign language online classroom

When teaching reading we tend to combine both bottom-up (understanding of lexicon, syntax, phrases, collocations) and top-down (meaning, comprehension, interpretation) processing (Brown 2001). And while bottom-up processing will generally be taught or aided by a teacher, or inferred from context in a similar way from student to student, in top-down processing, students will produce very different readings and interpretations of the text.

How do readers construct meaning? How do they decide what to hold on to, and having made that decision, how do they infer a writer's message? These are the sorts of questions addressed by what has come to be known as schema theory, the hallmark of which is that a text does not itself carry meaning. The reader brings information, knowledge, emotion, experience, and culture - that is schemata (plural)- to the printed word. (Brown 2001, 299).

Furthermore, in his research on free voluntary reading (integrating reading time into the language classroom), Krashen (2004, 3) found that "reading programs are also effective for vocabulary development, grammar test performance, writing, oral/aural language ability (Greaney 1997; Krashen 1989)". Students benefit in different ways and acquire different linguistic and cognitive skills through the act of reading in the classroom.

There are many different types of activities with texts which can be used in the classroom to practice and encourage language and interpretation skills. Basic reading comprehension

activities, where a student reads a text (on any subject) according to the language level, and then answers questions which are meant to assess understanding of the content, are the most common. According to Nieto (2013), reading comprehension activities can be considered as a synergy between different components (vocabulary acquisition, analysis, previous knowledge) that are meant to guide, help and facilitate the comprehension process for the foreign language reader. Tasks and question types in reading comprehension include true or false, multiple choice or extensive answers. Higher level students can also be requested to write a summary, review or analysis of a specific aspect of the text. The latter top-down activity is usually done with literary texts.

Texts can be further explored through their use of language. Students can do different vocabulary and grammar activities to help them understand the text and enhance their linguistic knowledge. Some examples of these activities used in our virtual classrooms are cloze exercises for either vocabulary of verb tense, using passages from the text, rewriting sentences using different grammatical structures, looking for synonyms and antonyms in the text or finding mistakes in a passage. But other skill developing activities may be created from texts. For example, it is possible to teach structure by jumbling paragraphs students then have to put in order, adding titles to different sections, dictation to work on listening comprehension and spelling, and reading out loud to practice tone, intonation and pronunciation. With higher level students it is also possible to focus on figures of speech and idiomatic language such as metaphors, similes and analogies, for example, as well as on the importance of punctuation for the adding of effect to the written word, aiding in their own writing skills,

In spoken language, we have phonemes that correspond to writing's graphemes. But we also have stress, rhythm, juncture, intonation, pauses, volume, voice quality settings, and non-verbal cues, all of which enhance the message. In writing we have graphemes - that's it! Yes, sometimes punctuation, pictures, or charts lend a helping hand. And, yes, a writer can describe the aforementioned cues. (Brown 2001, 304)

There are a lot of activities teachers can use to teach through and with texts, but there are also strategies students can

learn to improve their reading and to develop skills which help them to recognize, comprehend, analyze, and interpret language and content. Students can learn how to cope with not understanding the meaning of every word in a text, how to scan a text for information (which can be particularly useful in a test or exam), how to group ideas (semantic mapping or clustering) or to synthesize main ideas (Brown 2001; Grabe and Stoller 2001).

Texts can also be used to teach social, cultural and intercultural skills giving readers of a cultural background or immersed in a specific sociocultural setting the possibility of engaging with a different social and/or cultural reality. In this sense, reading texts and working with them in the foreign language classroom can promote empathy for other cultures and social backgrounds, raise awareness on different sociocultural issues as well as "encourage *positive attitudes towards* and *understanding of* speakers of foreign languages and their way of life" (Byram and Fleming 1998, 3). Furthermore, as also discussed by Byram and Fleming (1998) promoting the teaching of intercultural skills, we will argue, through the use of texts, has a reflective role which helps readers (foreign language students) to understand themselves, their society, culture and identity. And finally, besides the development of intercultural awareness through texts, students are also engaged in a systematic development of metacognitive and critical awareness processes.

When creating a task or activity on the learning platform, it is essential to define objectives, skills to be developed, criteria (in the case of an assessed activity), structure and duration. Once this is done, it is necessary to select the tools and resources which are going to be used.

Defining objectives also includes selecting the text according to the content matter, linguistic difficulty and length. "After goals and priorities are determined, texts and topics can be selected and tasks designed with an eye toward creating a meaningful, motivating, and challenging curriculum" (Weinstein 2001, 190). In online teaching, this sort of task is called an "e-tivity", a term introduced in 2002 by Gilly Salmon (Open University, UK), to define an online based collaborative activity that is student centered. According to Salmon, e-tivities,focus on the

learners - the people I call the participants, who are contributing, providing, reworking, interpreting, combining most of the knowledge. They overturn the idea that learning depends on one big expert and his/her conveying of knowledge. They are based on the strong idea that knowledge is constructed by learners through and with others.

This type of collaborative activity is effective in the online foreign language classroom because, not only does it encourage participation and engage students in a debate and in the sharing of information, but also promotes language learning and the acquisition of skills.

We are now going to demonstrate how texts are used in foreign language classes (English, German, French and Spanish) according to the following sequence:

1) Selected text
2) Objective(s)
3) Skills
4) Tools and resources
5) Task description
6) Assessment criteria (if applicable)
7) Duration
8) Teacher engagement
9) Follow-up

EnglishText:

(short story) Danticat, Edwidge (2020) "One Thing" *The New York Times Magazine's Decameron Project.*

Objective:

For this assessed activity, used in a C1.2 class, students read, interpret, analyse and review the short story "One Thing" by Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat. The short story is uploaded as a link at the beginning of the semester, so that students can begin individual reading at their own pace. A forum is created for the activity where information on the project, on the author, a link to her website and some context on the short story is provided to students.

Skills:
- Demonstrate the necessary knowledge of vocabulary and syntax or the ability to infer meaning in context to read and analyze an advanced level literary text;
- Demonstrate reading, comprehension and interpretation skills for a text in the English language;
- Demonstrate the ability to interpret characters, plot and meaning;
- Demonstrate the capability to express ideas and arguments in written or spoken form on an English text.

Tools and resources:

PDF or link of the short story, forum, quiz, PowerPoint, Zoom and assignment device.

Task description:

There are four parts to this activity. The first three are collaborative and not assessed, while the third is individual and assessed.

Part 1: Using the podcast tool, students take turns reading one or two pages of the short story and upload the recording as a podcast episode (indicating page number). Once the whole story has been read, students have not only practiced their speaking, but are also able to listen to an audio version of the story.

Part 2: Using the forum, students discuss different aspects of the story, including the characters, the setting, the author, style and help each other with any doubts they may have on plot and meaning. The role of the teacher during this activity is to moderate, spark discussion and help students with vocabulary. For vocabulary, it is also possible to create a quiz to help students to understand lexicon and idiomatic language.

Part 3: In this part of the activity the teacher schedules a synchronous session where the short story will be discussed.
Part 4: By this stage, students who have been participating in the activity will be familiar with the text. An assignment submission device is created and opened where students have an instruction sheet with guidelines on what to do next. They are required to do an oral review of the story with a focus on a specific aspect of

their choice. This review should be 5 minutes and they will be assessed on speaking skills, grammar, use of vocabulary, interpretation, structure, and originality.

Assessment criteria:
- Understanding of the story and characters
- Correct use of language (vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure)
- Ability to express ideas in spoken form, including correct structure and pronunciation.

Duration:
The complete task will take 3 weeks. The first part begins in the first week (but may continue throughout the remainder of the weeks). Parts 2 and 3 are done in the second week and the third week is dedicated to part 4.

Teacher engagement:
The tasks are mostly student centered, since the activity involves interpretation and students demonstrating their understanding of bottom-up and top-down processing. The teacher, however, is always present, either moderating forum discussions, listening to audios of pages from the story (and correcting pronunciation when necessary) and hosting the online class. The final task of the teacher is to listen to each review, grade it and provide valuable feedback.

Follow up:
It is important that students understand the reasons behind the choice of text. The text used in this activity is a very recent short story, published in 2020 on Covid 19 and its impact on relationships, family, rituals, as well as its altering effect on dreams and plans. Although no reference is made to the virus itself, there are a number of signs in the story that are representative of the virus. Most students were not excited about having to discuss Covid, nonetheless, they were able to approach the story through different readings and the end result was a collection of reviews and analyses of the story, its meaning, its metaphors and the representation of the reality we have been living over the past year.

Texts used for this level correspond to a C1 of the CEFR due to their narrative, linguistic and figurative complexity, and are intended to give students a broader knowledge of the English language and of anglophone literatures. Among the texts used for this level are stories by writers from the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean. The choice of these texts also has the aim of raising student awareness and increasing knowledge and empathy of other cultures, social realities, immigrant experience, war, trauma, illness, identity and the possibility of new beginnings. Topics which are in the course syllabus. One final word on the text is the importance of teaching students about varieties of English as represented in these narratives.

German Text: "[Handy-Knigge-Verbote und Benimmregeln für das Smartphone](#)"

Objective(s):
For this assessed activity used in a A2-B1 level class, students engage in a series of tasks using the above mentioned text "[Handy-Knigge-Verbote und Benimmregeln für das Smartphone](#)": as a starting point. Students produce a short learner text and an audio with their oral production for assessment. One of the objectives is to raise students' sensitivity and awareness for different cultural norms and expectations with respect to the use of smartphones.

Since the activity is going to be assessed, the link to the website and the instructions are incorporated in a document available in a digital device (called e-folio A) with a timer, where students can download the document and later upload their assignment within a predefined/ limited period of time.

Skills:
- Demonstrate the ability to comprehend more factual information in a German text on a familiar subject of interest provided they have sufficient time for rereading;
- Demonstrate the necessary knowledge of vocabulary and of syntax to comprehend the main information from a short authentic German text from the internet;

- Demonstrate the capability to express ideas and their points of view in written and oral language using structures and vocabulary according to the A2-B1 level;
- Demonstrate the capability to reflect upon cultural norms and taboos existing in their own culture;
- Demonstrate the capability to change perspectives and to identify, to reflect upon and to recognize cultural norms existing in other cultures.

Tools and resources:

Digital device with a timer where students download the PDF with the link and the instructions and where students submit their work.

Task description:

The assessed activity consists of two main parts, with part one focusing on oral production and part two focusing on reading and writing.

However, before the assessed activity is made available, students have been working for two weeks on the subject "social media in everyday life", by doing the activities in the textbook and the workbook. These textbook activities are complemented and extended by two learning activities (LA 3 and LA 4) provided in the virtual classroom, where students, among other things, are asked to do some activities based on authentic texts from the internet. The links and instructions are provided in the virtual classroom by the device "resource". Among the websites that students are asked to consult is the website of the assessed activity.

Therefore, by the time students start to work on the assessed activity they are familiar with the kind of texts, with the subject and the vocabulary. Besides, they have already done some reflection on the subject.

The assessed activity itself has two parts. In part I students have to listen to an audio where ten situations involving the use of smartphones are presented to them. Students are asked how they would react in those situations, and they have to justify their choices. Students are asked to take some notes, answer orally and record their answers on an audio file.

In part II students are asked to read the text "Handy-Knigge-Verbote und Benimmregeln für das Smartphone" available on the internet, a text about the "correct" use of the smartphone in everyday life, and then students respond to three tasks in written form.

Firstly, they have to compare social and legal norms and taboos existing in their own home-country with those referred to in the webtext. Then students have to identify, reflect upon and discuss cultural similarities and differences. Secondly, they have to paraphrase and explain in their own words, two terms mentioned in the text. Finally, they are asked to present some further suggestions for the good use of smartphones in public. In part II Students have to produce a short text.

Assessment criteria:
- Understanding of the main ideas of the web text
- Correct use of language in both written and oral form considering the course level (A2-B1)
- Ability to express their ideas in written and spoken form taking into account the course level (A2-B1)
- Creativity and critical reflection on cultural similarities and differences

Duration:
4 days (96 hours)

Teacher engagement:
The activity is student centered. The teacher monitors the whole activity and grades both the oral production and the learners' texts and provides feedback.

Follow up:
The group, in which this activity was applied is very heterogeneous in various respects. Some students have lived or currently are living in a German speaking country or in a country where German is one of the official languages. Other students are living in a different linguistic and cultural context abroad and some are actually living in Portugal. However, most of the students who choose German as a foreign language at the Universidade Aberta

have already studied at least one other foreign language before. For most of them it is the second or third foreign language. Therefore, when it comes to reading texts they can build on their linguistic competences acquired in other foreign languages.

The diversity of the group is reflected in the diversity of the texts and of the audios students produced. Students seemed to find the subject interesting and some of them got really engaged in the activity.

French Text
Title of activity: Back to childhood
Level: B1.2

Text and other materials: *Le Petit Nicolas* by Sempé-Goscinni, extract from chapter 1 "Un souvenir qu'on va chérir"[3]

Objectives:
The first objective is communicative, as it allows students to speak of an event or a memory in the past tense. The second, linguistic, where students make use of the past tenses: *imparfait, passé composé, plus-que-parfait*, but also work on and practice the concordance of tenses, the direct and indirect style as well as chronological and temporal markers. The third is cultural because it allows us to (re)visit the French school system, representations of characters in the classroom, class photos, the social characteristics of first names and the 1950s and 60s France.

Competences:
We aim at 3 competences through the different activities proposed, namely reading comprehension, writing and speaking.

Documents:
Excerpts from the book "Le petit Nicolas" in pdf format, as well as various non-literary authentic documents such as images (illustrations by Sempé, poster for the film "Le petit Nicolas", class photos) and videos (trailer and excerpts of the film *Le petit Nicolas*, and video clip of the song "On n'est pas à une bêtise près" by Renan Luce).

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3 Translated as: "A memory we will cherish"

Sempé and Goscinny's story is composed of both the text and an image that explains it. *Le Petit Nicolas* is considered a classic of French children's literature and it is interesting to study it in the context of a work on narrative. It is like a collection of short stories, each chapter functioning independently but using the same characters. The story is told by the young protagonist giving the text a light, naïve tone, which is at the origin of the comic vein. Thus, many themes relating to childhood are present in the text and allow the reader to feel concerned and to identify with the characters very easily. Furthermore, *Le Petit Nicolas* has been adapted to other media: comic strips, film adaptations, cartoons, etc. It is therefore interesting to be able to draw on these different sources for this activity. Finally, the author René Goscinny is also the creator of other key characters in French culture such as *Asterix* and *Iznogoud*. This is very interesting from a cultural point of view.

Aims of this activity:

Our main objective is to get the students to know how to tell an anecdote in the past tense by correctly mastering the concordance of tenses. We ensure the cohesion and coherence of their productions. To achieve our objective, it is necessary to review the formation and use of the past tenses (*passé composé* and *imparfait*). We focus on situations in which one of the two tenses is privileged to the detriment of the other. We also work on the transition from direct to indirect speech and vice versa. Our learners are able to report the words of a third person in their narrative.

The extract allows us to tackle cultural points relating to education such as the French school system, the clichés of the characters that one can meet in a classroom, the class photo which is very important when one is a child or parent. It seems interesting to us to briefly discuss the sociology of first names in relation to the names present in the chosen extract (most of which are now obsolete but were popular at the time of the novel's publication). Parallels can be drawn between French culture and that of the learners. This should be put into perspective of the 1950s and 1960s in France.

Task description:

What follows is a step-by-step description of each task successively: To begin the activity, which will last for 2 weeks, and to prepare the text beforehand, we first propose a speaking activity to the learners. We put several class photos (one old, one recent and one from the film *Le Petit Nicolas*) in the class forum and we let students express themselves orally by asking:
- Who are the people in these photographs?
- What can you say about the times when these photos were taken?
- In the last photograph, the pupils are all wearing uniforms. Is this still the case today in France? In your country?
- Why take a class photo?

This last question allows us to make the link with the title of the short story "A memory we will cherish". This first activity involves mostly exchanges. It is an opportunity to review the lexicon that our learners need to understand the text. The lexicon relating to photography and school are also indicated in the forum.

At the end of this first activity, I share with the students the beginning of the film <u>Le Petit Nicolas</u> which puts into images the text studied in the rest of the activity and I also share the extract of the work which will be worked on with the students.

In order to work on reading comprehension, I have erased the verbs conjugated in the pat tenses. The learners must fill in the spaces with the correct tense. This activity allows us to go over certain concepts that the learners may not have assimilated. For example, it is important to check that the subject-verb inversion with speech verbs after direct speech is respected as often as possible. Another possible activity is related to the concordance of tenses in sentences that are in direct speech and indirect speech.

For the writing activity, the extract was selected so that the story appears unfinished, incomplete. Students are therefore asked to imagine the end of the story in a few lines using: past tense, direct speech and indirect speech.

In the extract studied, the protagonist Nicolas tells about the mischief of his little friends who cannot behave. The mischievous character of the group of friends can be found in the video clip by

Renan Luce, whose song "[On n'est pas à une bêtise près](#)" is used as the theme song for the film adaptation of the novel *Le Petit Nicolas*. It is also possible to ask students to try to identify the characters in the video using the information in the text and to find Nicolas, Geoffroy, Agnan. This is followed by a forum discussion on childhood mischief where learners talk about their childhood and any mischief they got up to.

This written activity, developed from the song by Renan Luce, requires students to write a composition on the following theme: "Write about a silly thing you did as a child and your parents' reaction. Use the appropriate past tense, direct speech and indirect speech". (approx. 250 words)

Students share their final work in the forum.

Follow Up:
The extract and the novel itself are very enjoyable to read. The themes addressed are timeless and touch on childhood producing a stream of feelings, allowing the teacher to use this text today as well as in five or ten years time. The themes are conducive to exchange and discussion. They allow learners to improve their production skills by expressing their opinions on topics that concern them and with which they can identify.
From a cultural point of view, the novel offers learners an insight into French society in the 1960s: the descriptions of the characters, the values, the habits of the French at the time which should be developed further from this extract.

Spanish Text: (opinion article) *La vida comienza a los 40,* by journalist Hernán Casciari.

Objective:
In this case of the Spanish class, the activity was created for a B2 level course. As this is usually a very small group, oral interaction via video-conference tools is common. Also, students are exposed to a very wide range of texts, short and long, as we also read a short novel per semester. Before I continue, I would like to comment on a very specific matter when teaching Spanish to Portuguese speakers who compose the large majority of the students in class. Both Portuguese and Spanish are proximity

languages derived from Latin, sharing common historic and language development processes. This is reflected in the existence of many shared words that are different in regard to their significant variations and frequency use. These similarities in both languages' grammar system and lexicon, are perceived as an advantage by students first exposed to the formal learning and language acquisition process.

Nevertheless, as they advance in language use, subtleties regarding the correct use and combination of words may arise and hinder the communication process. For that, the teacher's systematic feedback and follow-up reveals itself as absolutely necessary to secure the correct language acquisition.

Back to the activity, the text used is an opinion article on how the author perceives the aging process related to the accomplishment of life goals. It was made available to the students via a link to a Moodle resource tool where they could simultaneously read and listen to a recording of the text recorded by the teacher.

The main objective was the development of reading fluency, understood as the ability to read fast, precisely and within the pronunciation and intonation patterns of the foreign language (Gómez, 2016, 3). In order to do so, a set of different activities was proposed; each of them with a specific learning objective that had to be achieved in order to produce the final activity. This methodology responds to a task-based approach (Breen 1987, Candlin 1990, Nunan 1989) that favours language learning through the development of activities where students use the language in context.

Also, a forum was created in order to activate students' previous knowledge about the theme of the article by providing them with more material (a short movie, another opinion article by a different journalist and some images of people growing up). According to Mejia (Mejia 2013, 3) reading comprehension is a process that demands the reader's active participation regarding knowledge construction processes and the implicit meanings the text may present. For that purpose the reader's previous knowledge and experiences proved to be fundamental.

Having said that, these are the learning objectives for the activity:

- Demonstrate the ability to correctly infer the main ideas and arguments of the proposed text;
- Demonstrate the capability to express ideas and arguments, orally, from a Spanish text;
- Identify phonetic differences between two varieties of Spanish: español de Argentina vs castellano.

Tools and resources:
PDF or link of the opinion article, podcast, podcast recorder, forum, H5P activities, song.

Activity description:
As previously mentioned, there are four parts to this activity. Each one has a specific objective that aims to be put in practice in the final part of the activity.

Part 1: Attentive reading and oral comprehension. Students were presented with the text in both written and oral formats. The instructions specified that they had to attentively read the text (silent reading focusing on understanding main ideas and perspectives) and then listen to the audio recording to identify the most characteristic sounds of the Spanish phonetic system (castellano) and reproduce them in a reading out loud activity.

Part 2: True/false and lexicon exploitation through the use of H5P activities with automatic feedback and correction. Using the resources and activities that Moodle provides is one of our pedagogical criterions when planning an activity. For this instance, students encountered two activities that aimed to diagnose if the text content had been correctly inferred (true/false H5P activity), and also to help systematize new lexicon and its definitions (drag and drop H5P activity).

Part 3: This part of the activity consisted of grammar revision and intercultural and cognitive awareness activation through a video/song.
Taking into consideration that the final activity had to be presented orally and being aware of the possibilities of speaking and reading

comprehension activities for the development of oral skills, I chose to work with a song from that perspective. According to Cullen (1999), when a student listens to a song some of the cognitive processes of decodification are activated: on the one hand, the student transforms sounds into words that form meaningful phrases; while on the other, he/she is capable of understanding the metaphorical or real meaning of a song. Saricoban and Metin (2000), as well as Várela (2003), also state that songs have an important role for teachers and students as they help develop all language skills and activate both brain hemispheres.

Having said that, students were instructed to first listen and watch the video that was framed into an H5P cloze activity. They then had to first write down the phonetic differences they perceived with regards to Spanish language varieties and, second, fill in the gaps with missing words (specific Argentinian variety vocabulary/ past tense forms).

Part 4: Audio recording through H5P content activity. Finally, all contents had to be used in a contextualized oral activity that asked students to reflect orally (for 3/4 minutes) on how they thought their lives would be at the present time, and how they really are regarding school, work, family and self-development. The means for submitting this activity is, again, an H5P audio recording activity. This activity required individual feedback from the teacher, while others had immediate feedback and correction (true/false, drag and drop, fill in the gaps) or forum consultation as a way to verify their answers (suggestions on how language varieties differ).

Assessment criteria:
- Understanding of the article's main ideas and arguments.
- Correct use of language (vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure).
- Ability to express ideas in spoken form, including correct structure and pronunciation.
- Ability to diagnose some of the phonetic differences between Spanish varieties.

Duration:
The task took place during a week. All activities were made available at the same time, giving students the chance to submit their answers according to their time availability, learning rhythm

and level of language. It was posted from the first day that they would have seven days to complete the task.

Teacher engagement:
The tasks in this activity are mostly student centered, since the activity involves the act of interpreting and demonstration of understanding of bottom-up and top-down processing. The teacher functions as a moderator, always present and attentive to forum discussions, listening to audios (and making any necessary corrections) as well as hosting the online class. The final role of the teacher in this activity is grade assignments and provide valuable feedback for student improvement.

Follow up:
As aforementioned, follow-up included the student's verification of the hypothesis when comparing language varieties in terms of phonetic systems. In order to do so, the teacher posted a spoken and written text explaining the most significant aspects in the activity forum. A conversation was maintained in the following days where students added more information and even tried to reproduce the other variety's phonetic characteristics recording themselves through one of the forum's tools.

According to the CEFR competencies as defined for C1 users of Spanish from a communicative point of view, I believe the following have been worked on and achieved:
- The student is capable of understanding a great variety of tests with some degree of difficulty and also to recognize implicit meanings in them.
- the student is capable of expressing him/herself fluently and spontaneously.
- the student is capable of making a flexible and correct use of the foreign language for social, professional or academic goals.
- the student can produce clear, well-structured oral or written texts showing a correct use of organization, articulation and cohesion text mechanisms.

Conclusion
Working with different types of texts has given us the possibility of not only exploring how to use written language to develop all the skills, but also, as online teachers, to explore different tools and strategies to teach through texts in a virtual learning environment.

The pandemic sparked reflection, bringing us closer as a team, to work collaboratively and reflect on theory, practice and the sharing of experiences. The type of activities we developed over the past year, also gave students the space and place to work collaboratively in an effort to explore and develop their individual language skills.

The main objective of this article was to discuss the use and benefits of texts in foreign language teaching by providing an overview of how texts are used in our online classes at Universidade Aberta through the selection of a specific activity and level in each of the four languages taught at undergraduate level. It was also our aim to provide a glimpse into our foreign language group and how we work collaboratively to further pursue research and implement changes, and improvements, to our teaching-learning methodologies. The pandemic brought about many changes in education systems throughout the world. In our case, it provided not only challenges, but also opportunities to explore the possibilities to pursue our work as a team and to better understand student needs, creating the most adequate materials for online language learning.

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