# 7 Remote language teaching in the pandemic context at the University of São Paulo, Brazil

## Mônica Ferreira Mayrink[1],
## Heloísa Albuquerque-Costa[2], and Daniel Ferraz[3]

## Abstract

This chapter aims at presenting an overview of how our experiences as professors of Spanish, French, and English studies at the Department of Modern Languages (DML) of the University of São Paulo (USP) responded to the challenges put forward by the pedagogical and technological practices required since the outbreak of the COVID-19 health crisis, and the adoption of measures of social isolation in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Our pedagogical practices are shared through a description of the institutional context and our students' narratives. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first one presents a brief overview of the institutional context. The second briefly problematizes the decision-making process to go fully online, and the challenges of the remote program. Section three explores the experiences of the three professors and their students by discussing pedagogical practices and students' feedback. In conclusion, the text discusses the lessons learned for future actions.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, collaborative knowledge building, feedback, Brazil.

1. University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; momayrink@usp.br; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3635-7768

2. University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; heloisaalbuqcosta@usp.br; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4621-6822

3. University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; danielfe@usp.br; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8483-2423

# 1.    Introduction

The impact of the global health crisis caused by COVID-19 has had overwhelming effects on many dimensions of human life, such as the economic, social, and psychological dimensions – for example, many have lost their jobs, and many have suffered from social isolation and witnessed thousands of deaths. The educational field has not been an exception, given that the sudden change from traditional face-to-face teaching to remote and online 'emergency' teaching has profoundly altered the personal daily routine of students, teachers, and the administrative staff, faculties, and other educational institutions. In these contexts, we have had to adapt ourselves – individually and collectively – to the 'new' reality. At the same time, we have sought to better understand the threat that haunted all of us and endangered the physical and mental integrity of citizens of every corner of the planet.

Within this context, three weeks after the beginning of the 2020 school year, professors[4] from the USP and their students were taken aback by the institutional decision that claimed 'USP cannot stop'. As a result, in the middle of March, they began to face the enormous challenge of reframing and adapting their educational practices within the traditional undergraduate course of modern languages. In its 86 years of history, the university has never witnessed such a situation.

Thus, this work discusses how our experience as professors of Spanish (Mônica Mayrink), French (Heloísa Albuquerque-Costa), and English (Daniel Ferraz) at the Department of Modern Languages of the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences, USP have faced the challenges put forward by the pedagogical and technological practices required since the outbreak of the health crisis and the measures of social isolation in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, where we are located. Our pedagogical practices are shared through a description of the institutional context and our students' narratives. We believe they portray some of the difficulties and solutions also encountered

---

4. In this chapter we use the term 'professor' to refer to those who teach at university level.

by colleagues from other departments and areas, who were also surprised by this unknown and unexpected reality. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first presents a brief overview of our institutional context. The second section problematizes the difficult decision-making process to go fully online and the challenges of the remote program. Section three explores the experiences of the three professors and their students, by discussing pedagogical practices and students' feedback. In conclusion, the lessons learned and planning of future actions are discussed.

## 2.    Institutional context

USP is a public university, supported by the State of São Paulo, Brazil. It offers undergraduate courses in all areas of knowledge, free of charge. There are also postgraduate programs in all fields of knowledge, offering Master's and PhD degrees. Their objective is to educate highly qualified human resources for teaching, research, and scientific and technological development. In addition to undergraduate and postgraduate courses, USP offers one year certificates and up-to-date courses for the community.

Since its foundation in 1934, USP has played a fundamental role in advancing research in the country, whether in scientific, technological, or social fields. Currently, USP is responsible for more than 20% of all scientific production in Brazil. It is ranked #115 in Quacquarelli Symonds Global World Rankings 2021. The DML was the highest ranked department at USP (#38) in the area of arts and humanities. The languages and literature courses at USP are attended by approximately 5,000 students. They offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, covering the areas of language, linguistics, teacher education, literature, cultural studies, and translation.

More specifically, the DML (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish) offers undergraduate courses for Brazilian students coming from all over the country. It currently has 49 tenured professors and seven assistant professors, all

of whom have a doctoral degree and many, in addition, have already undertaken post-doctoral research. Most tenured professors work in undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and develop research and activities for the external community, which are more directly articulated with the community outside the university. Only a few professors from the languages and literature courses have dedicated themselves to research on teaching and technology. This peculiar characteristic may explain, to a certain extent, some of the difficulties faced over the past few months. In the midst of the serious global health crisis that surprised Brazil and the world, university teachers were impelled to rapidly adapt to modalities that were completely different from the ones that had traditionally been developed for years.

In terms of technical support – even before the pandemic – USP had already entered the digital era. There are several online platforms where the public can access the knowledge produced at the university. There are courses, events, and classes recorded in various channels: Canal USP (USP channel of communication) and e-Aulas (e-Classes/Moodle), among others. The university also offers a wide digital structure to professors and students. Most student enrolment and administration procedures are carried out online. On the teaching side, almost all processes are digitized and online, such as students' registration, managing of downloadable attendance lists files, grades, and reports. At USP[5], professors and students can actually access more than 25 university digital domains (from human resources departments to class management).

The academic community at USP has access to the Moodle platform, which is available as pedagogical support for face-to-face courses at the undergraduate, graduate, and community levels[6]. In DML, it has been used mainly as a repository and communication channel between professors and students. However, previous studies (Mayrink & Albuquerque-Costa, 2015, 2017) had already pointed out other possibilities of use, some of them not traditionally explored by USP users,

---

5. https://uspdigital.usp.br

6. Before the pandemic Moodle was used mainly as support for the development of extra-class activities. With the pandemic outbreak most of the teachers started using it as the main platform for remote teaching.

such as interaction tools. These possibilities showcased a favorable potential for online language teaching at the university.

The urgency in the migration from face-to-face to remote teaching ended up highlighting the Moodle platform as one of the main options to meet the new pedagogical needs that arose from the social isolation of professors and students. The technical support from staff, in addition to local initiatives such as the provision of direct communication channels of support for teachers and students, were important allies in the basic training of those who had never used Moodle tools.

Most significantly, guidance on the use of this platform was offered by the Information Technology Department, where different workshops to present other tools such as Google Meet and Zoom were designed and offered to members of teaching staff. This technical support provided professors with technological options that could adequately respond to the pedagogical objectives and didactic choices they wished to develop. Given the specificity of the work with the teaching and learning of languages, it was important to seek technological alternatives that offered interaction between professors and students, and among students, providing them with real opportunities for linguistic exchange. However, as will be seen below, the experiences that professors began to build over the months pointed to the use of complementary platforms and tools that could be better suited to their teaching practices, according to the specificities of the subjects they teach.

## 3.     Decision-making process and challenges of the remote program

Under the motto 'USP cannot stop', professors and students were taken aback as most undergraduate and graduate courses were practically 'forced' to become virtual online courses. Practically overnight, professors and students had to find ways to negotiate all aspects of higher-level education, and this situation raised some questions related to the following topics: contents (would contents be the

same as those initially planned?), interaction (if professors and students were used to interacting in classes, what kinds of interaction would remote teaching promote?), assessment (would evaluation be the same?), technology knowledge and expertise (were professors and students tech savvy enough to adapt to this new technological reality?), not to mention the number of students who ended up with depression and anxiety during the process of adaptation to remote learning (how would we deal with professors' and students' anxieties and depression?). As the decision-making process came to us in a top-down approach, many of these questions have not been answered yet.

The languages and literature students' profile is quite heterogeneous. In the initial years of the course, we welcome many students with little or no proficiency in the foreign language, while there are also those who are highly proficient. This heterogeneity requires teachers to plan classes that address content that is sufficiently accessible for those who are taking their first steps in a foreign language but also challenging for those who are linguistically proficient. The development of oral and written comprehension and production is one of the objectives to be pursued throughout the course. At the same time, language studies are carried out to deepen knowledge in the areas of phonetics and phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse studies, sociolinguistics, among others.

We understand that in order to achieve these objectives it is essential to provide teaching strategies that allow negotiation in the building of knowledge, and this is a challenge when it comes to teaching in the remote mode. The work we have developed in the areas of Spanish, French, and English seeks to preserve the spaces for permanent interaction among the different participants in the process in the remote modality. In this sense, with the support of the Moodle platform and other tools (Google Meet, Zoom, etc), we have offered different possibilities of students' engagement with the content to be studied. To this end, we have sought a balance in the use of tools and strategies that guarantee more intense interpersonal and interactive classes by developing proposals that adjust to what Valente (2011) calls "being virtually together" (p. 29). At the same time, we have allowed students a more individual, autonomous, and subjective interaction with the contents.

## 4.     Pedagogical practices and students' feedback

The guiding principles of our practice in a remote context are based upon Vygotskian assumptions of valuing the collaborative building of knowledge, in which the most competent peers (teachers and students with a greater degree of mastery of content) play a pivotal role in the mediation of learning (Vygotsky, 1930/1998). Also essential in this process are the mediation instruments, which make up the different technological tools used to facilitate interactions, access, and the practice of language.

By the same token, our practices are based on Freire (2005), for whom the education of critical and active citizens, capable of critiquing the status quo and naturalized perspectives, is paramount. Even though Freire sought to rethink elementary education carried out in Portuguese language, much of his critique reverberates in university education carried out in foreign languages departments around the country. Obviously, 'banking education' (Freire, 2005) does not refer to every university professor's pedagogy, and perhaps the generalization and universalism conflated here should also be put under scrutiny. In many contexts, we still hear from students that this is the case: too many lecture classes, very few possibilities for discussion, negotiation, interaction, and questioning from students. This is perhaps the Achilles' heel we try to avoid (ourselves included). The more we see university as a place of critique, questioning, and projection of social alternatives, the more we act to keep it as our place of critique (Ferraz & Duboc, 2021). In this sense, in this case study we do not offer 'solutions' for online remote teaching and learning of languages. However, we can offer the reader some of our pedagogical practices and their outcomes by bringing our students' voices to the fore[7]. In order to do that, each of us will showcase below the ways we have dealt with remote language.

---

7. As we are worried about improving our teaching practices, we always consider the importance of giving students plenty of space to evaluate the learning process they have gone through along the semester. In this particular case study, all the data presented were collected in July 2020 (end of the first academic semester), when students were asked to write reports in the language they were studying (Spanish and French comments were translated into English). We have been granted permission to publish their comments.

With regards to Spanish studies, Mayrink – right after the first week of social isolation – intensified the use of the Moodle platform in order to continue her *Spanish Language I* and *Spanish Language III* classes[8]. At first, during this transitional period to the new remote education, the environment was prepared for the provision of materials and resources, as well as for the development of individual and group asynchronous activities. After a week, the students and professor decided to hold synchronous meetings, using the Google Meet tool, twice a week, in accordance with the face-to-face course. However, the first experiences presented difficulties of various kinds (problems with network connection, lack of resources, such as ample access to wi-fi, availability of camera and microphone, adequate physical spaces to attend synchronous classes, among others). Such restrictions prevented the development of prolonged interactions and led the groups to negotiate synchronous and asynchronous class times.

These challenges, added to the personal difficulties faced by the students (family members infected with coronavirus, reconfiguration of their work routine, depressive states), also influenced decision-making from the point of view of didactics. In order to promote greater balance and flexibility of the proposed activities, meeting times, and evaluation methods, it was important to guarantee the recording of synchronous meetings so as to make them available to students who could not participate in these interactions. This promoted a greater participation of students individually and in groups. The activities that involved the design of videos and murals, audio for animations, recording of personal texts, among others, were appreciated by students. At the end of the semester, their feedback was very positive:

> "I liked the way it was done […], in the conditions that we had […]. Of all classes I had, this was the most dynamic, the one that most kept the student-teacher interaction, […] without being that passive thing. I liked that you always brought different formats for classes, such as power point, online exercises, Moodle, some videos. I think these activities

---

8. The courses were offered twice a week and the groups had an average of 30 students each.

complemented each other in a very good way, and the many interactions allowed us to practice and talk" (M.R.).

"Professor, this was the subject that best worked for me […]. I don't know if it was the dynamics or because this is a language class […] the use of the Moodle platform was the best" (E.).

"The course was very organized, you could find everything on Moodle […] there was a lot of support material. Not to mention the recorded classes for those who couldn't attend synchronous classes. So it worked really well. […] I think that the fact that the class was small also helped (...) I really learned a lot. I feel more confident with my Spanish […] I can only thank you because you handled Moodle very well" (M.).

In relation to French, Albuquerque-Costa has discussed with the students[9] – who were beginning their first experience as French teachers – how to develop their own classes using different platforms. The syllabus content was adapted to accommodate the discussion of topics like:

- creating virtual classes to welcome their own students. Also, they discussed how they could modify the spaces of the platforms using images, animated effects, and messages to connect and motivate the students;

- sharing the plan of the course with the students and explaining in detail what they were supposed to do; and

- choosing oral and writing support related to the objective of the class. A very interesting discussion was developed on this topic, for example, their methodological steps to create activities and pedagogical choice to organize their courses.

9. Albuquerque-Costa taught a group of 18 students.

One point that is important to mention is that students realized that sometimes they had to use more than one virtual platform to develop their oral and writing activities. This probably shows they have had training in digital literacy. Below, some of her students' feedbacks are shared.

> "Taking college courses remotely was both a challenging and enriching experience. It was challenging to reconcile online classes with the family routine, but on the other hand, it was enriching in the sense that I was able to learn more autonomously. In the discipline of French, there was understanding with the atypical situation of remote education and, therefore, consistent with the activities and assessments required during the course. My learning took place in a more autonomous way, but always guided by the professor […]. Another change in relation to the face-to-face modality was the more frequent use of the computer and digital tools. What I was able to learn from the remote teaching experience was mainly the organization for studies and autonomy in the learning process" (J.O.).

> "I had already used Moodle in subjects where I should read texts, but this semester was different, as there were classes and activities to do. I didn't do them all due to lack of time... I'm working from home too. From the discipline, I liked the Exposé activity… I did it little by little and exchanged messages in the Moodle forum, which I didn't know" (L.M.).

With regards to English, Ferraz has discussed and negotiated the syllabus contents of the two courses, *Discourse studies* and *Semantics*[10], with his students since the first weeks of classes. As the pandemic hit us, this negotiation was transferred to online settings. In addition, the assessment system was discussed and adapted to pandemic times as they went through a very interesting evaluation experience: as soon as the pandemic broke out, the professor scheduled online meetings through Google Meet, outside of class hours. In the meetings, students discussed

---

10. Both courses had approximately 40 students each.

new forms of assessment and how each group and student would like to be assessed, for example through response papers, video recording, assessment, or interviews with the professor.

Assessment negotiation is just one of the many examples of the adaptation to remote language teaching. Like in Mayrink's experience, the professor and students also talked about the difficulties brought by lack of access or slow internet connection, the lack of interaction in classes, the lecture-like classes and their consequences in terms of the impact on the learning process, the choice of the pedagogical practices and methodologies for remote education, and the fact that many students felt depressed and anxious in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, isolation, and mandatory remote education. Despite these difficulties, most students' feedbacks were positive.

> "First of all, I would like to thank you again for the lessons and your posture during this pandemic moment. I was able to enjoy immensely all the classes and the content taught, so thank you so much for continuing the course and always listening to the students' side!!" (H.M.).

> "I wanted to say that your classes are opening my mind to issues that I didn't know existed. I am admiring the classes" (M.S.).

> "Good evening, professor! I would like to thank you again. I'm truly happy that you enjoyed the content. It was really singular to me to try this experience. I loved your course and the fact that you created some different options for the evaluation" (P.S.).

The pandemic has affected both students and professors and all of them have been forced to discover new paths that can guide them on this unpredictable situation. Pedagogical and technological challenges associated with personal difficulties in dealing with the disease, a new routine, and a mental strain make it clear that we cannot expect our teaching and learning activities to be a mirror of a regular course. We need to be sufficiently open-minded to reconsider and redefine our practices so as to find, together with our students, the best ways to

move on. Nevertheless, individual attitudes do not guarantee the success of the enterprise. It is absolutely necessary that the university provides both professors and students with excellent conditions to circumvent any difficulties that might hinder the progress of the teaching and learning process in such an unusual context as a worldwide pandemic.

## 5.    Conclusion

There is still a lot to learn when it comes to dealing with mandatory remote teaching, a process that – at least in our university – was ordained top-down and overnight. The first lesson that we learned from this experience shows that it is necessary to unsettle the idea that digital and face-to-face environments are on opposite sides. In fact, this conundrum is not new. Our practices contend that many characteristics of face-to-face teaching can and should come to terms with digital settings: contents adaptation, assessment negotiation, and creative ways of interacting. As we have pointed out throughout the paper, these should actually be lessons for every language teacher, teacher educator, or professor with or without pandemic times, with complementary or full online education.

Another lesson points to the fact that we have focused on language teaching and learning and its linguistics dimensions, when in fact language as a social practice, as put forward by Freire (2005), has been an important dimension in our work. In the future, we believe that the university should acknowledge a constant formative and technological support policy that backs up the construction of new remote, online teaching possibilities in regular courses, in post pandemic times.

In this context, we believe that blended learning could be a very productive alternative for university language courses, since it may enhance the possibilities of learning by combining different spaces and times. As pointed out by Moran (2015), this teaching modality provides an expanded classroom which allows the teacher to communicate with the student in a face-to-face environment as well as in a digital context. This also promotes a more balanced interaction with the students altogether and with each one of them individually. However, as

emphasized by Moran (2015), in order to achieve this goal, it is imperative that the university is open to review its curricula, as well as its conception of time and space. Besides, those who are responsible for developing teaching education programs have to think about the new demands of the 21st century so that future language teachers feel prepared to contribute to the development of didactic activities, methodologies, and learning environments. Finally, we believe that all these forthcoming practices put forward other possibilities of research that can be shared in a broad academic community in order to expand the studies in the area of language learning and teaching.

## References

Ferraz, D. M., & Duboc, A. P. (2021). *Language education and the university: fostering socially-just practices in undergraduate contexts*. Pimenta Cultural. https://doi.org/10.31560/pimentacultural/2020.540

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Mayrink, M. F., & Albuquerque-Costa, H. (2015). A extensão da sala presencial para o Moodle: espaço de aprendizagem, reflexão e pesquisa nos cursos de Letras Francês e Espanhol da USP. In K. A. Silva, M. Mastrella-de-Andrade & C. A. Pereira Filho (Eds), *A formação de professores de línguas: políticas, projetos e parcerias* (pp. 215-232). Pontes.

Mayrink, M. F., & Albuquerque-Costa, H. (2017). Tecnologias digitais no ensino de línguas. Ensino presencial e virtual em sintonia na formação em línguas estrangeiras. *The Especialist (PUCSP), 38*(1), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.23925/2318-7115.2017v38i1a10

Moran, J. M. (2015). Educação Híbrida: um conceito-chave para a educação, hoje. In L. Bacich, A. Tanzi Neto, A., & F. M. Trevisani (Eds), *Ensino Híbrido: personalização e tecnologia na educação* (pp. 47-66). Penso.

Valente, J. A. (2011). Educação a distância: criando abordagens educacionais que possibilitam a construção do conhecimento. In V. A. Arantes (Ed.), *Educação a distância* (pp. 13-44). Summus.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1930/1998). *A formação social da mente*. Martins Fontes.

**The world universities' response to COVID-19: remote online language teaching**
**Edited by Nebojša Radić, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied**