

ESL TOOLS – GOOGLE TRANSLATE AND VISUALS IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper outlines the benefits of implementing a strategy for intercultural awareness and language development in the online English class, which consists of twenty international students, enrolled in the Foundation Year Program. Students come from diverse cultural backgrounds and have an intermediate language proficiency. They aim to improve Romanian language skills to apply for a bachelor's degree program at a medical school in Romania. The curriculum includes twenty-five compulsory Romanian classes per week but the students are given the opportunity to attend an English class per week, which is not compulsory. The English instructor collected information systematically to get a complete picture of the students' needs, displaying openness to embrace a multicultural class and sparking conversations to learn about their culture. Then the instructor created an online culturally sensitive strategy to ensure a comfortable and an inclusive teaching and learning environment. The outcomes of this online instructional strategy reveal that students improved their intercultural awareness whereas visuals and Google Translate tasks helped them understand specialized vocabulary and English grammar rules through the lens of their native language. Moreover, students gained confidence to read long texts and wanted to practise more. Therefore, Google Translate is an attractive and efficient tool for building students' vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation if used in tandem with other online teaching methods designed for honing students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.

Keywords: international students, online instructional strategy, inclusive teaching, intercultural awareness, Google Translate, visuals, benefits

1. Introduction

The internationalization programs of universities around the world, as well as the mobility of students and teachers & staff even at low rate during the Covid-19 pandemic are still the major determinants of diversity and the adaptation of programs and methodologies to manage cultural diversity is imperative. The President of the Association of European Universities, Prof. Michael Murphy, states “The universities that want to retain their high levels of excellence must be able to attract talent at all levels, and in a globalized world, this means being open to diversity. Diverse research environments are obviously more creative and produce better results; various learning environments are also more stimulating than homogeneous ones.” [1]

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The Foundation Year is an important linguistic tool of educating & training international people who want to continue their undergraduate studies at the host university or at another university in the host country. Therefore, this program embraces diversity and all the teachers involved in it see diversity as an opportunity to enhance their cultural awareness, to apply teaching methods based on students' needs and to help students understand and accept cultures through the lens of their own culture. During the Foundation Year, international students acquire the necessary reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in Romanian for academic purposes through intensive Romanian classes. English is an optional subject but we always encourage students to attend this class because reading, writing, listening and conversing in English can help them integrate in multicultural environments while studying and working.

Teaching English to a multicultural group is not an easy task even if the teacher has participated in training sessions on multiculturalism and knows how to deal with diversity. It is even more challenging in an online environment. By investigating the students' cultural backgrounds, observing their interaction and learning style, teachers can develop cultural sensitivity and thus become cognizant of students' different needs in order to design appropriate materials and employ instructional strategies accordingly. Instructing a multicultural class online has given me the chance to take the perspective of others, to notice, to comprehend the cultural differences, and to apply new teaching methods that can build confidence and increase student cooperation and engagement. In addition, in the online environment, empathy has played a key role in building rapport with the students. Through mutual attentiveness and positivity, students have involved in the class activities believing in the strength of cooperation and coordination.

The first semester teaching activity is based on General English lessons such as *Nice to meet you, Countries and nationalities, Family, The kitchen, The bathroom, Seasons and months, What is the weather like, Telling the time, Jobs and routines, Asking for directions, At a restaurant, At the weekend, Visiting the doctor, At a hotel, Transport, The body, Clothes and colors and In a clothes shop*. Students learn and practise vocabulary related to these topics, and study the possessive adjectives, the adjectives for describing people, the cardinal numerals, the adverbs of frequency, the present simple, the present continuous and the past tense. The second semester teaching activity is based Business English lessons such as *The workplace, Companies and places, Company history, Work relationships, Making small talk, Describing people at work, First meeting, Business people, Business trips, Marketing words, Location, Achievement, Problems at work and Workplace rules*. In this semester, students learn useful vocabulary and know:

- how to talk about the history of a company using past tense simple, the comparative forms of basic adjectives, the present perfect form of the verb *be* and verbs with irregular forms,
- how to describe the location of people and objects in their offices, the use of *can* and *cannot* for talking about permission and prohibition,
- how to explain the relationships between the members of a company's staff,
- how to use various conversation starters and responses, and
- how to describe people's character traits at work.

In order to develop a teaching and learning strategy we conducted an online survey in which each student expressed his or her preferences. In addition to this teaching material, we created activities to integrate and involve all participants, generating an open and inclusive climate, which influenced students' persistence, curiosity, sense of fulfillment and outcomes. We used Google Translate as a validation practice to help our students build confidence in their ability to learn vocabulary and grammar. This practice gave students a sense of belonging as they started to participate openly in class, to overcome fear and to ask for teacher support.

2. Strategy for Intercultural Awareness and Language Development in the Online Teaching & Learning Environment

In order to help students be acquainted with their cultures contrastively, we considered it is necessary now, in the online environment, on the MS Teams platform, to develop a strategy for intercultural awareness and language development. Although diversity and inclusion are discussed in different contexts, we needed to identify possible barriers that may impede us to boost inclusivity in the online learning environment. To safeguard ourselves, we made a list of the challenges we might face in implementing our online strategy for intercultural awareness and language development: stereotypes, poor attendance because English is an optional subject, reluctance to be part of an online team, refusal to answer questions, fear to answer questions, etc. Therefore, we designed the class activities to overcome the barriers that likely occur in the language classroom and we developed a holistic approach for Microsoft Teams, which led to significant effects on the teacher-student relationship and on the student-student relationship, which we detail in the following paragraphs.

We agree with [2] that the scope of technologies used in language education has emerged rapidly but we do not believe that the “teachers and their beliefs have been the key decision makers in integrating language-teaching methodologies successfully” in the online learning environment. From our perspective, given the pandemic context, teachers and students need to cooperate to implement the teaching methodologies.

Analyzing the characteristics of the 21st century highly effective teachers [3], we have noticed that these qualities are also relevant to a digitally competent language instructor who has adopted a networked approach during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, we added three more characteristics (i.e. *being networked*, *empathizing* and *envisioning*) that are equally important and required to succeed in managing a multicultural group in the online learning environment (see Fig. 1). The members of multicultural groups have different needs and expectations.

We strongly believe that managing effectively different cultures in the online language classroom is the result of our experience and desire for lifelong learning. This results in a portfolio, which enhances the teacher's capacity to observe the online student behavior, to

reflect on the teaching habits, to improve intercultural awareness, to learn how to use new digital tools & how to boost motivation. In addition, the teacher can establish classroom rules sympathetically and empathetically to build positive relationships, to engage students in group work and pair work and to work on collaborative solutions when problems arise. Microsoft Teams allows us to make an educational partnership with international students, which favors cooperative learning and a natural need of students for interaction.

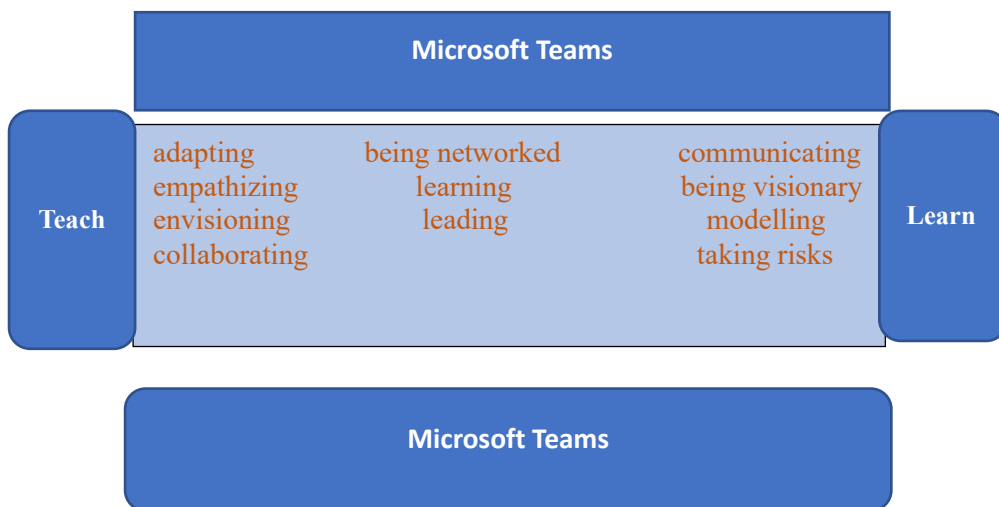


Fig.1: The portfolio of the language teacher

Exploring various approaches to multicultural pedagogy, we found that two researchers designed “an intercultural electronic chat task to see if students from different cultural backgrounds (Taiwanese and Japanese students), who did not have similar English language abilities or similar academic interests, would be willing to communicate using English” [4]. Both groups were open to chat in English and acted accordingly. The Taiwanese group had a lower proficiency but considered the task as an incentive so they “gained confidence to participate fully in discussions”, which helped them learn from their peers [5]. After investigating similar studies, the authors found that “online programs develop intercultural awareness and facilitate negotiation of meaning while culture-focused questions enhance intercultural understanding, which reduces prejudice and stereotypes” [6].

In our approach, the teacher becomes a model and presents a traditional Romanian costume, a traditional English costume, then writes greetings in both Romanian and English that all students pronounce assisted by the teacher. This creates an engaging atmosphere and arouses students’ interest in comparing and contrasting cultures. Similarly, we ask students to dress in a traditional costume, to describe the costume in one of our classes, and to write some greetings in their native language that all students will utter with the help of the student who has made the presentation and taken on the role of instructor. This activity motivates students as it empowers them to manage a small activity.

Another activity was well received by the students: they created a video individually, in which they show and explain the preparation of a favorite dish from their country, and at the end of the presentation, each student presents once again the ingredients needed to

prepare the dish. Based on these recordings, the teacher involves them in genuine speaking activities because the students enjoy talking about food, the type of cutlery that can be used and about the specific hours of the main meals of the day in their country.

In addition, a teaching activity that establishes an emotional bond between students is the presentation of family members showing family pictures and explaining on what occasion the photo was taken. Even the description of pets that have become members of the family is welcome. This activity encourages students to present important moments in their family life, emphasizing the physical and emotional traits of family members, their age, occupation and hobby.

Finally yet importantly, the teacher may ask students to present a remarkable person from their cultural, artistic, literary, historical, medical, etc. area. This helps students to discover new things about the country of their peers, the achievements these people have had in various fields and how they influence the lives of citizens. This activity helps students develop their listening skills and actively participate in other reading activities about other personalities in the world who fought for human rights, who contributed to technological development, the creation of drugs and vaccines, the implementation of projects for economic development, etc. Moreover, reading comprehension exercises will enrich their vocabulary and hone their ability to make a summary.

Through these teaching and learning techniques, the language teacher aims to broaden his/her cultural horizon, to create an inclusive classroom, to learn things about his/her students' culture, their language needs, their learning style, etc. Moreover, the teacher encourages students to overcome shyness, to ask questions or to ask for clarification from the teacher concerning the topics discussed in the classroom. The teacher accepts the students for what they are, motivates them to achieve tasks more rapidly and focuses on their intercultural knowledge, making them aware that the differences between people eventually bring people closer to build a bridge between diversity and inclusion that offers many opportunities to all those involved. We have constantly adapted to the new reality due to the Covid-19 pandemic, having a student centric approach, in which everyone is part of a whole, is being listened to and is helped to improve his/her abilities for future job roles.

In order to ensure a good transition to the online environment, the teacher needs to empathize with the students' poor Internet access, to help them fix the issues related to the share of their screen, the search for files in the Class Materials or to the use of the meeting chat. Moreover, the teacher needs to check their learning pulse by constantly discussing with each student to find out if they are content with the content of the lesson and class activities. In the online environment, the multicultural class management is very challenging because the teacher cannot be aware of every cultural nuance so he/she needs to find ways to encourage learners to speak up, give feedback, and assess the class activities and the teacher's classroom management. To give learners a more interactive role, to stimulate their emotions and attention, we place emphasis on interface hence on the use of visuals.

Our strategy fosters an online educational environment, which replaces boundaries with new possibilities, leveraging on the skills that everyone brings to class. In this strategy, the

teacher's role is to make the lesson plan and objectives available to everyone and to develop the potential of the learners he/she works with. Furthermore, the teacher commits to enhance the online teaching methods and expand activities regarding the use of tools that can enable them to understand the meaning of new terms and grammar rules.

By meeting learners who come from diverse cultures, we have learned to create a positive and inclusive atmosphere in the language classroom. At the same time, we consider the teacher and students make up a community where people respect each other, converse, collaborate, encourage each other, and help one another to achieve tasks. All students regardless of race, religion, gender, etc. are treated as an integral part of the educational process. The more they accept diversity, the better the teacher can increase inclusivity in classroom thus, students can develop their communicative skills, become more creative, accept to work in a team, etc.

3. Inclusive Teaching in the Online Environment

Inclusive teaching can be tangible if there is a permanent dialogue between teachers and students, where the teacher talks about his/her experience with international students, the structure of the course content and listens actively when students talk about their concerns, preferences and needs for online learning. Thus, the teacher can choose an appropriate approach to help them access course materials and achieve learning goals. Some students did not respond so we conducted an online survey (Microsoft Forms) to get responses from every student about their previous online instruction, collaboration, communication, outcomes, etc. The online survey revealed that students had collaborated well on other online platforms with colleagues and teachers from their home country since the outbreak of the pandemic. Other students responded they did not have reliable internet access and asked to be excused if they did not manage to participate actively. Overall, our interaction with the students in the first class and the results of the online survey allowed us to be mindful of students' concerns and preferences, personal issues and technical barriers.

Nevertheless, how can we ensure that all learners will be motivated to succeed in an optional English course? Firstly, we strongly believe the teacher's extra presence is mandatory to engage with learners online. Therefore, we joined the meeting earlier and sparked fruitful dialogues with the students about the weather, their adjustment to the city vibe, their plans to move to Romania, the previous course content, etc. Secondly, by creating learning opportunities like the ones presented in the previous section will motivate students to attend the online classes and collaborate with colleagues to achieve various class tasks. Thirdly, the teacher can use the Assignments tool to monitor the students' language progress, especially by being flexible on homework deadlines since some students are in different time zones or they do not have enough time to do their homework because they have a job. Finally, the feedback on student work should be offered permanently in a positive and supportive tone in class congratulating them in English, Romanian and in their native language to add a personalized touch.

When we design the online course content, we should always have in mind multiple ways to engage the students through various means of accessibility. We are aware that some students have poor Internet access or do not have access to a microphone or a webcam. Therefore, we offered them alternatives to access materials online, to engage with colleagues and with us, the teachers by:

- sharing lesson content in a PDF format;
- removing barriers to language learning through support materials, additional information, keys to the exercises done in class in a format that learners can adjust easily (e.g. the possibility to increase the text size or to modify the brightness, the possibility to follow the text due to appropriate fonts and colors);
- enhancing online collaboration through discussion groups, which focus on topics proposed by the teacher or self-selected topics relevant to the learners' personal or professional interests;
- providing feedback on progress for each of the language skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening);
- using Google Translate as a tool for reinforcing learners' understanding of English vocabulary and grammar;
- providing opportunities to interact with former graduates, which spark their curiosity and create unforgettable moments (e.g. we invited former graduates who currently study Medicine).

4. Specialized Vocabulary Acquisition

We aim to apply the vocabulary instruction exposing students to many terms and explaining them to the students so that they understand their meaning in various contexts. Since all students want to study Medicine after graduating from the Foundation Year, we included in this teaching strategy a vocabulary comprehension method to increase students' medical vocabulary knowledge. Our model is based on Marzano's six-step process for building academic vocabulary [7], as shown in the table below:

1. Direct Instruction	In this stage, we have focused on learning medical terms in context and learning grammar based on induction. In order to stimulate oral communication, we have given special importance to the description, explanation and pronunciation of the terms
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	using the Google Translate speech feature. We have selected online materials relevant to the level of knowledge of students, which deal with various medical topics and contain images and texts that help students repeat the language material and memorize frequent terms and phrases.
2. Linguistic	Another way to engage students is to ask them to reiterate the description and explanation of the terms in their own words. This activity reinforces their knowledge and encourages them to write their own sentences using the described terms.
3. Non-linguistic	Students are asked to create nonlinguistic representations of knowledge in the form of mental images and to construct nonlinguistic definitions of key terms.
4. Journal of terms	Students participate in activities focused on collocations and identification of specialized terms in a text. When the activities are concluded students are asked to list the collocations and the identified terms in a journal.
5. Discussion of terms	The teacher sparks dialogues about the symptoms of the cold or symptoms of the flu, for instance, and asks the students to discuss in pair the afferent terminology.
6. Games	<p>The teachers involves students in role-based collaborative games (e.g. patient-doctor dialogue) to encourage spontaneous use of language.</p> <p>We believe students need a break from the usual language class routine. For example, we may involve them in another spontaneous and funny game, which requires students to compose half sentences in turn and the other students are required to finish the sentences instantly.</p>

For several years, I have been teaching English to international learners and I have always implemented my strategies successfully. I have found recently that when the teacher uses Google Translate as part of the vocabulary development stage or as a validation practice, learners feel more confident and are more excited about their tasks when they witness themselves as successful learners. Their vocabulary improvement effort has consisted of selecting words with more intention, developing pronunciation and building communicative competence.

These are the benefits associated with Google Translate, for each student:

- learning English specialized vocabulary and collocations by translating them into the students' native language

Even if students can guess the meaning of words from the context they have read, they still need to contact their native language as it helps them grasp the diverse meanings of a word. Moreover, they will see the synonyms of the respective words and will remember some of them when they read similar texts.

- exercising and learning the pronunciation of the new words

It is necessary for students to practise and learn the pronunciation of new words when they read them first. Otherwise, they risk pronouncing them wrong in subsequent reading and speaking activities.

- writing short sentences using the new vocabulary and word order correctly

The texts that students read show them how to use in writing the encountered expressions and structures. However, the translation of short sentences from their native language into English will help them compare the word order in both versions of language and even reinforce their knowledge of the grammatical structures as shown in the French and English examples below:

TOUT LE MONDE est allé au concert.

(sujet + prédicat + adverbe de lieu)

Maria parle bien le RUSSE.

(sujet + prédicat + adverbe de manière + complément d'objet direct)

Je l'ai vue a L'EXPOSITION la semaine dernière.

(sujet + complément d'objet direct + prédicat + adverbe de lieu + adverbe de temps)

EVERYBODY went to the concert.

(subject + predicate + adverbial of place)

Maria speaks RUSSIAN well.

(subject + predicate + object + adverbial of manner)

I saw her AT THE EXHIBITION last week.

(subject + predicate + object + adverbial of place + adverbial of time)

5. Conclusions

The way teachers communicate and behave in the digital environment can have long-term consequences on the learning process. The inclusive online environment is shaped by many factors, including the teacher's perception of diversity, the teacher's experience, the students' awareness of their own culture, the students' willingness to learn about other cultures, the teacher's networked approach, the students' access to the Internet, etc.

Building a portfolio for teaching English online to intercultural students in these unprecedented times, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, was worth the effort. We reflected on our activity and we kept in mind what went wrong and what went well in the previous online academic year, which made us see Microsoft Teams as a leverage and an opportunity to implement an online strategy for intercultural awareness and language development through inclusive teaching. Thus, the language teacher offered accommodations for different styles of learning, after surveying students and taking into account their responses. Students' sense of belonging activated when they were motivated to enrich the content of lessons and their performance increased when they were encouraged to use Google Translate as they went deeper into the class material and dealt with the specialized vocabulary.

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