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## THE KORSAKOW PLATFORM AND NONLINEAR NARRATIVES AS A MEANS TO ENHANCE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN HE

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*Ana Maria Costa*

Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DEI  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000 -0002- 8373- 4223

*Isabel Oliveira*

Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CISEd  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8255-5955

*José Pereira*

Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DEI  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000-0003-2121-2240

*Romain Gillain*

Instituto Politécnico de Leiria, CI&DEI  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1933-1072

*Susana Amante*

Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DEI  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1300-0785

*Susana Fidalgo*

Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DEI  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7323-2158

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**Susana Relvas**

Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DEI  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000-0002-5526-8325

**Véronique Delplanq**

Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DEI  
Portugal  
ORCID: 0000-0002-5456-3832

**Abstract:** The Covid-19 pandemic has posed great challenges to higher education (HE) and, in particular, to foreign language (FL) teaching. If, on the one hand, the lockdown and remote learning measures have brought constraints to teaching and research activities, on the other hand, they have fostered resilience, promoted creativity, and accelerated the use of technologies and digital transformation. The use of the Korsakow platform and the creation of non-linear storytelling are the strategies underlying an innovative methodology concerning the learning process of French and English as FL, in HE in Portugal. The JASM project (Open window onto the world: foreign languages, multimodal creativity, and pedagogical innovation in higher education) involves a group of students attending the bachelor's course in Media Studies of the School of Education in Viseu. Students develop their assignments based on data analysis, related to diverse cultural and linguistic contexts within the city of Viseu, including interviews, photographs, and narratives centred on a migrant's tradition. Digital art and online tools ensure greater motivation in acquiring multilingual skills and developing multilingual awareness. In this way, the various dimensions of language (aesthetic, emotional, and cognitive) are reinforced, in a remote teaching scenario/context, which is creative and collaborative while also mobilizing interdisciplinary skills. Such a reflection appears to be particularly relevant at a time when one needs clearly to adapt teaching and learning to the needs of society and rely upon pedagogical innovation, with students whose HE training has specific objectives other than the ones of those enrolled in language courses. The methodology is discussed, and the results of this project-based learning are presented.

**Keywords:** pedagogical innovation, higher education (HE), foreign languages (FL) and linguistic and cultural diversity, online

tools, multilingual and multimodal artistic creativity.

The role of Information and Communication Technologies in education has always been closely linked to the analysis of their use by teachers and students in a classroom context or as a tool to support the teaching and learning process. Moreover, due to the threat to public health caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the academic world was forced to adapt its teaching strategies. At the end of the 2019-20 school year, it became necessary to reflect on the options taken and on the use of technologies. The JASM project (Open window onto the world: foreign languages, multimodal creativity, and innovation in higher education) intended to develop, with Media Studies students from the School of Education in Viseu (Portugal), an active and innovative pedagogical experience concerning the teaching/learning of the two FL taught at this HE institution: French and English. The activities implemented within this project aimed at deepening the cognitive (multilingual and multicultural), aesthetic and emotional dimensions, combining multimodal communication with artistic creativity, and establishing bridges with the local immigrant communities. Bearing on the aforementioned presuppositions, this paper will dwell firstly on studies pertaining to pedagogical innovation developed in the context of teaching/learning languages, especially emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinarity and the combination of the active methodologies highlighted in this project. Then, the way digital art and digital tools allow for the increase of multilingual and multicultural performance is exemplified, through multilinear narratives, using digital storytelling. Lastly, the project developed by a multidisciplinary team with Media Studies students is described, as well as the

methodological options and the evaluation practiced with the students. It is thus intended to contribute to the fundamental reflection on the educational process both on the part of teachers and students.

## **PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES LEARNING (FL) IN HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)**

Pedagogical innovation is today of crucial importance in the FL teaching/learning process, considering the challenges faced by modern, highly competitive societies, required to be prepared, in the current context of changes and uncertainty, inasmuch as the labor market is concerned. It is precisely taking this into account that FL have been the object, in the last decades, of an epistemological, theoretical, and methodological paradigm change, with the aim of determining their nature and mission, reformulating concepts, and renewing educational practices with a view to the effectiveness of learning. It has been proven that the use of innovative educational methods facilitates student engagement, improves analytical thinking, reduces apathy, and encourages peer learning (SANTOS, FIGUEIREDO, VIEIRA, 2019). This paradigm change also presents challenges for the teacher, who now assumes the role of curriculum designer (KALANTZIS, COPE, 2010; PANIAGUA, ISTANCE, 2018), defining learning targets based on authentic tasks with specific objectives. It is also up to him/her to design innovative interdisciplinary projects using technologies and to guide learning in constant dialogue with the student, in a transforming school context more encompassing than the school premises alone, towards a knowledge-producing community.

Recent methodological contributions within language Didactics point to the need to implement active methodologies (active learning strategies), focused on the

student, which imply the investigation and construction of meanings in a real context and prepare students for professional integration. It is essential to use differentiated teaching practices, in a transdisciplinary context, that respond to the motivations, interests, needs and learning rhythms found in each class, thus creating learning opportunities and encouraging students to achieve their full potential.

Starting from the constructivist paradigm (BADA, 2015), focused on the student and on the way they build knowledge and give meaning to their experiences, autonomous work should be encouraged, carried out in a collaborative way (cooperative learning), which allows for the development of a critical and participative capacity.

This paradigm requires the combination of different active learning methodologies, in a holistic approach, such as embodied learning, multiliteracies, project-based and inquiry-based-learning, with proven benefits in language learning, enhancing the experience of leadership and autonomy that favour students' intellectual maturity and confidence, besides stimulating their creativity and cooperation. (PANIGUA, ISTANCE, 2018; SINNAYAH, RATHNER, LOTON, KLEIN, HARTLEY, 2019).

Communicative Paradigms privilege the cultural dimension in FL teaching. In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, T.S. Eliot presents a comprehensive definition of culture: "It includes all the characteristics and interests of a people" (ELIOT, 1991, p. 21) and, in turn, Claire Kramsch understands the humanist concept of culture, in its pragmatic aspect of "way of life" (2006, p.11), as an integral component of language teaching: "It includes the native speaker's ways of behaving, eating, talking, dwelling, their customs, their beliefs and values" (KRAMSCH, 2006, p.13). It becomes, therefore, vital to raise

the student's awareness of cultural diversity (Cultural Awareness), carried out within the scope of FL teaching, highlighting peoples' habits and customs, their daily lives, and experiences. In addition, there have been recent contributions in neurodidactics, which reiterate the importance of the students' neurocommunicative skills so that they are able to communicate critically within their social context (CARRILLO-GARCÍA; MARTÍNEZ-EZQUERRO, 2018), giving special emphasis to the affective component. It allows, on the one hand, to inform the student, at the linguistic and cultural levels, and on the other hand, to help shape this emotional maturity, ethical-social responsibility in respect and interaction with other cultures, artistic creativity, and aesthetic experience.

In this sense, the use of nonlinear narratives carried out within the scope of the JASM Project, applied to FL teaching, may become, as we will see later, an effective practice, contributing significantly to improving language skills, building positive group dynamics, promoting problem-solving, draw conclusions and form opinions, stimulate cultural awareness, tolerance and respect for others (BENCE, 2017, p.6). Petra Bence distinguishes narrative from storytelling: "While storytelling is only a written or spoken presentation of the story, a narrative includes storytelling, as well as any other way in which a narrator chooses to present the story and create a bigger picture" (BENCE, 2017, p. 2).

The use of Korsakow digital tools, StoryJumper associated with the photographic record, as we will discuss in the following section, provides a dynamic documentary framework. It is in this context of humanist education, which promotes multi-literary practices with a view to stimulating a critical and creative sense, that the new methodologies concerned with the holistic education of the student are put forward.

## **USE OF DIGITAL ART AND ONLINE TOOLS TO DEVELOP MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL SKILLS**

There is no longer any doubt that the use of new technologies in the teaching/learning process in HE requires diversified training strategies, in order to promote greater student motivation and in an attempt to bring real working conditions closer to the students' forthcoming profession. The current priorities of the European Commission are based on building Europe's digital future, for a more open, more democratic, and sustainable society (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2020).

FL teaching in HE does not dismiss these new challenges. Online tools leverage innovative and creative strategies for modern learning suited to these new generations of digital natives (students who were born in the digital age and their experiences have been indelibly influenced by internet culture). These tools enable the development of multilingual and multicultural skills that the classic classroom does not allow, from an internationalization perspective, with actors involved in a path of empowerment and collaborative work (DELPLANCQ, COSTA LOPES, FIDALGO, REGO, RELVAS, 2018).

Associating art with FL learning and creating original tools from this articulation, for working with students, is not a new practice. The resulting interdisciplinarity brings about a dynamic that will change the student's vision, namely in terms of cultural stereotypes (CLOQUET, 2017). Brown (2018) states that the language-art-technology association is a 21st-century response to the linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of elementary school students. It opens up new job perspectives, enabling the learner to evolve in their expectations regarding their studies and active citizenship. The same author presents a pedagogical strategy that integrates digital art with the purpose of elaborating

stories based on the cultural experiences of multilingual students in primary education, using StoryJumper, a digital storytelling software.

Still, at the level of basic education, the work of Amelia and Abidin (2018) concludes that the use of digital narratives has positive effects on FL students: they become more interested, enthusiastic, motivated. Storytelling can also be a tool for working outside the classroom. Together with a multilateral pedagogy, the creation of digital stories is used as a communication tool in a course with advanced level students of English as a second language in the United States of America (VINOGRADOVA, 2018). Students, in groups of 6, decided upon the themes of their digital stories, developed the narratives, looked for images and music, and created a storyboard; some used photographs of family members. The digital narratives were created in Final Cut Express. Students interacted at different levels: for example, they discussed the contents and the choices made; requested feedback on the work carried out, and suggested the inclusion of photographs and music. They produced the linear digital narratives in video editing software. The collaborative work was supervised by the teacher, who encouraged students to carry out self-assessment; (re) solved queries, and provided the necessary considerations/ recommendations. Students expressed their abilities by engaging in multi-literary practices and performing tasks with a critical and creative sense.

The use of multilinear narratives in teaching-learning contexts removes the traditional line of linear/straightforward thought, where the usual acquisition of knowledge according to a specific order gives way to a non-hierarchical structure, with pseudo-multiplicities, which rely upon the assumptions of the rhizome thesis proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2007).

In a way, this thesis forms a network of links between the unpredictability which characterizes flexible narratives, the modelling of concepts, and a theoretical positioning that challenges the classic arborescent hierarchy one encounters in categorical and sequential thinking by levels.

The decline of arborescent thinking and the rise of the rhizome as part of the digital paradigm help us understand the affinity of multilinear narratives with web architecture and, consequently, the attraction of students to learning environments similar to the internet culture. This digital technology, in addition to combining the classic technique of narrative and storyboard, institutes a dynamic of variable navigation that invites the viewer to participate in the viewing journey. The storytelling methodology is at the centre of interest of an increasing number of FL teachers who prioritize the search for a stimulating collaborative environment to captivate their audiences. Digital storytelling is one of the most effective and efficient learning practices for students of humanities and social sciences: essential to understand the notions of interculturality and to develop communicative and cultural skills. Its implementation can assume different methodologies (CHATTERJEE, MISHRA, PADHI, OJHA, AL-ABSI, SAIN, 2019).

The Korsakow platform was created for journalists, filmmakers, artists, etc., with the aim of providing an editing system for building interactive multilinear films for the web. Its basic structure enables one to organize text and photography, video and sound from a database and trace visualization sequences that can change dynamically depending on the user/viewer's choices. Therefore, the constructive process of a K-film requires a non-hierarchical way of thinking that favors an open branching scheme, with the unfolding of the narrative and the acceptance

of multiple outcomes according to the. It is a powerful tool for composing 21st-century stories. It relies upon the logic of computers, namely their ability to combine the various media, languages, and story elements to create an original, flexible, and creative narrative.

The JASM project was conceived as a teaching-learning experience of FL in HE in Portugal, with students attending a course for forthcoming journalists. It fits within the framework of pedagogical innovation in HE, involves interdisciplinary work, and is to be seen as a combination of several methodologies of active, embedded learning, with the student at the centre of practices: project-based learning, research-based learning, for a holistic approach, in a collaborative environment likely to lead to connected practices and techniques.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, from March 2020 to the end of the second semester of that year, which resulted in social distancing measures and restrictions, the project methodology had to be revised and adapted to an online format, combined with the strategies that were already being implemented, involving FL, photography, digital art, and intercultural communication.

The project aimed to pedagogically innovate in the teaching of FL in HE, particularly in study cycles whose predominant training is not focused on the learning of a specific language. FL are learnt on the basis of social, cultural, and artistic stimuli, and this learning comes by doing, that is, it takes place through the production of materials within the framework of linguistic and cultural diversity. It also aims to encourage good interdisciplinary practice, build knowledge, and stimulate know-how in a collaborative and cooperative way, in order to increase students' multilingual and multicultural awareness, using varied, creative, and multimodal approaches.

## METHODOLOGY

The students were divided into five groups of four participants, envisaging cooperative learning. The assumptions, objectives and methodology of the project were presented and discussed with the whole class (32 students). The methodology followed the principles of project-based learning.

Each group selected a different nationality of migrants among the most representative ones living in Viseu, considering statistical data collected from the Portuguese Immigration and Border Service in Viseu, dating back to 2018. The chosen nationalities were Angolan, Belarusian, Indian, Italian, and Ukrainian. The students met the representatives of each of the selected communities and carried out a detailed and circumstantial study of the most significant aspects related to the culture and language of their country (research-based learning, using participant observation methods and semi-structured interviews). The product of this research work was duly prepared by the students and presented in French and English to the class and the language professors.

Complementary seminars, led by a specialist in photography and digital art, were held to support the students' tasks: the first, held at the beginning of the experiment addressed the assumptions of the documental value of photography; the second, developed later, focused on the explanation of the organizational potential of the work on the Korsakow platform (fostering interdisciplinarity, through the aesthetics of hybridism present in the language of digital art and the use of communication technologies).

Firstly, the groups had to find an immigrant living in Viseu that could be said to be a representative of the previously selected nationality. Therefore, social networks helped in the exchange of information and, what is more, the Local Support Centres for Migrant

Integration provided them with some contact information. The aim of the first meeting or contact was to present the project and to carry out an interview, thus applying the professional skills foreseen in the students' training profile. At the same time, they made a photographic record aiming at documenting and revealing important aspects of the personal journey of the interviewee, highlighting some specific personality traits. Subsequently, the students wrote down the immigrants' life stories. These tasks were also reflected upon in FL lessons and were one of the components of the students' assessment.

The last stage consisted in the choice of a specific object or a tradition that was meaningful for the immigrant, and whose analysis would allow for the discussion of an aspect of the culture of that person to be portrayed, resorting to the language of animated films by the students under the guidance of their professor. The health situation and the constraints arising from the pandemic during the period of implementation of the project required a re-examination of the outlined methodology. In this sense, a storyboard of fictional stories developed by the students was designed. This is where the data of the exploration of culture, material elements, and digital scenography is gathered, having as reference the data collected from the interviewees. For this purpose, students used the photographs captured previously and carried out new research to ensure a more accurate illustration of the fictionalized narratives. As a project conclusion, all the material produced, in different media and languages, was organised in the Korsakow system, resulting in the creation of a dynamic and interactive documentary of the project, under the direction of a digital art specialist. The results of this project are available on the JASM website, on social networks and will also be exhibited and projected in events. Finally,

results will also be released in an e-book.

## ASSESSMENT

The research is based on a mixed-method assessment design. Quantitative data were collected in the first phase, using listening, and writing tests. A language level assessment test was also carried out, in each FL, to the group of students involved in the project (20) and to the rest of the classmates (12). The tests were developed according to the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for reading, writing, and speaking. They were inspired by the DELF, DALE, and TOEFL tests. Response times were checked for each skill block.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Then, the second moment of the evaluation was carried out, based on the exchange of experiences between the students involved in the project and their peers, to check their motivation regarding their progress.

With the COVID-19 crisis, the final evaluation was also qualitative. All qualitative data were thoroughly analysed and described.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current project discusses the challenges that HE, and particularly the teaching of FL, are facing. These challenges are motivated by the everchanging world that inevitably requires similarly hectic development of Information and Communication Technologies and of one's role in the Knowledge Society we inhabit. Furthermore, the current pandemic situation, caused by COVID-19, which led to the lockdown of a large part of the population, also meant a challenge for HE. This situation had repercussions in the educational community, which promptly resorted to emergency, online teaching, requiring a reorganization and adaptation, by the academic community, to new dynamics of interaction and learning.

Nowadays, the traditional teaching model, based on the transmission of information, memorization, and reproduction of knowledge has become obsolete. As previously discussed, the aim of this project is to enable a co-construction of competencies, in which students are called upon to intervene as active agents of their learning, preferably in collaboration with their peers and in contexts that are as close as possible to real communicative situations.

To this end, the aesthetic assumptions of digital art are assumed as a leitmotiv around which the teaching/learning process takes place, and the interactions and negotiations between learners and the surrounding community enhance effective (and often affective), real and innovative experiences in terms of communication, such as those previously described and which are endorsed by Berriz, Wager & Poey (2018, p. 12):

The arts are an integral part of our lives that represent our values, connect us with one another, provide avenues for research and learning, stimulate our imagination, and provide us with a sense of agency to create positive impact in our communities and the larger world. In addition to the richness of the process, a final product/performance also plays an important role in community building. (...)

The arts are more than an added benefit in any educational context; they are foundational literacies that engage participants in the process of observing, connecting, finding solutions, making meaning, and communicating/expressing (...). In a world fraught with challenges, it is helpful to have art to help us understand, translate, and transform both our place in the world and our vision of a better future (GREENE, 1995).

Considering these measures now reinforced by the vicissitudes and idiosyncrasies adopted in response to the contingencies of the period,

the JASM project gained new momentum and importance at a time of emergence of digital literacy. The undergraduate students of the Media Studies Course of the School of Education of Viseu got involved in a project work that defines the actors, the phasing, and the adjusted procedures: mainly observation, the establishment of interpersonal relationships, reflection, search for solutions, implementation and evaluation; in short, the students cooperated in order to creatively mobilize interdisciplinary skills that allowed them to create multilinear narratives, using the Korsakow platform, while progressing in the learning of French and English.

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