

Challenges in LSP Online Teaching and how to overcome them - A Case Study in “French Language and Business Communication” Classes: Connecting Dots

Olivia-Cristina RUSU¹

Abstract

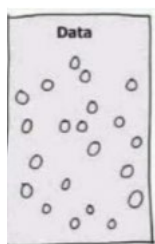
Given the current global circumstances, all educators have encountered manifold challenges related to their jobs. Facing unprecedented situations, they have been forced to continuously adapt to a completely new work environment – the online. Certainly, even before the pandemics some educators flirted with the idea of online teaching, but very few of them really had the opportunity to experience it first-hand. Two recurring questions are the premise of this paper. The first one refers to finding out the extent of the teaching impact upon students, while the second one brings up possible means of inspiring and encouraging the teacher to, ultimately, motivate the students.

Therefore, this paper, under the form of a testimony, focuses on two aspects. First, it briefly puts forward a number of challenges and personal reflections on online teaching of languages for specific purposes (LSP). Secondly, following these considerations, it suggests a number of learning activities anchored in the Connectivism Learning theory in order to exemplify possible best practices in online foreign language training. It also presents a case study from “French Language and Business Communication” (FSP) classes in an endeavor to connect the dots between the educator’s language content ownership, students’ needs and preferences and an intriguing channel of communication, the online.

Keywords: education; teaching; online; LSP; communication

DOI: 10.24818/DLG/2022/SP/13

1. Introduction

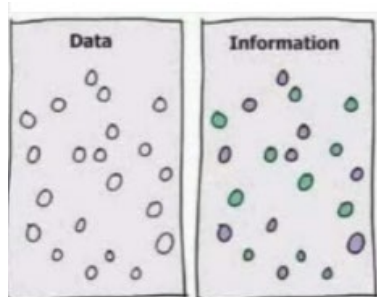


Again, you can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. Because believing that the dots will connect down the

¹ Olivia Cristina Rusu, Department of Foreign Languages and Business Communication, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, olivia.rusu@rei.ase.ro

road will give you the confidence to follow you heart even when it leads you off the well-worn path. And that will make all the difference.” (Steve Jobs, 2005, 5:12).

In his 2005 Stanford Commencement Address, Steve Jobs suggests his audience that the previously acquired experience and gathered knowledge are to shape future events, even if at a first glance one could not see, nor understand, hidden links or dots. Building upon personal previous research, in this paper I will emphasize that, despite its potential drawbacks, online education proves to be both an immeasurable resource of knowledge and information, and, at the same time, that it can be seen as a mere – still extraordinarily enthralling - channel of communication through which educators are to use their previous unwavering educational dots - such as their ownership of the content and of different educational techniques, both in terms of the study object.



As a starting research point to gather information, I looked for additional educational dots to connect, and so I applied a qualitative open questionnaire to three groups of 1st year students of the Faculty of International Business and Economics, from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The open questionnaire applied to my students to collect opinions and feedback on their online learning experience, revolved around these two questions:

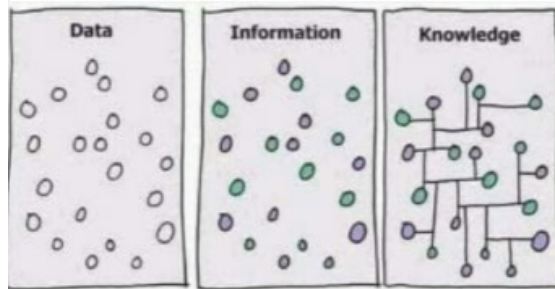
- 1) Having last years' experience of online education, what class activities do you still remember? and
- 2) Should you be able to go back in time, what learning experiences would you repeat?

The main conclusion that emerged from the introductory open questionnaire was that they particularly enjoyed those activities that would require them to be active and involved in the educational process. Thus, in the online environment as well, language educators are able to create truly stimulating learning environments for students by merging the teaching principles of student engagement and dynamic learning with the new technology mediated education theories, concepts and tools. More precisely, the use of a wide range of inclusive teaching methods and activities is beneficial to students, no matter the environment or the channel

of communication. The trainer's choice of practices and activities has a great impact upon broadening students' learning experiences.

2. Implications of Connectivism

The learning scenery nowadays has stormed up upon educators and students alike with gaps and cracks, and with the need for relevant



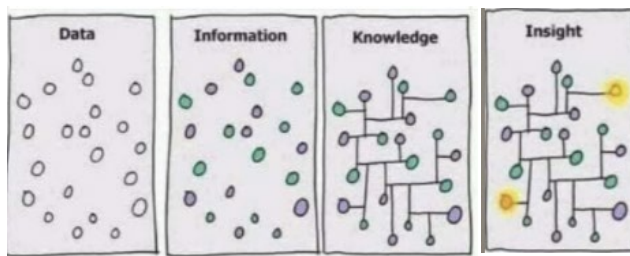
methods to keep up in the digital era. Introduced in 2004 and 2005 by two theorists, George Siemens and Stephen Downes, the 21st century's learning theory, *connectivism*, is a learning theory that inspires students to link

together thoughts, data, information, knowledge, theories and persons in a useful, educative way, comprising technology as a key factor of the learning process.

The promoter of this theory, George Siemens, argues that learning should not be exclusively based on what we know, but also on our capacity to share that knowledge with others, through connections: "Greater levels of diversity require individuals to communicate, share, and be transparent with each other" (2006:56). In fact, Siemens claims that knowledge can be reflected upon as having two polarizations – a person either knows a subject by oneself or one can look for and find information upon it (2006:32).

Since access to knowledge is no longer an issue, the educational need of acquiring *know-how* in a specific field is complemented by the necessity of choosing the right information relevant to a specific context, or, in other words, by the need of *know-what* and *know-when* (Zolzaya Shagdar: 2020). Connectivism also endorses the idea of sharing information, meaning that one can acquire knowledge by sharing it to a community of individuals. Therefore, learning occurs within a network, it happens outside an individual, such as through group collaboration, social media, podcasts or blogs. A network is characterized through diversity, consequently connectivism encourages and allows for different viewpoints. In fact, connectivism stresses the role of social and cultural contexts in the process of learning, developing the already-set educational theories

through the digital lenses, outsourcing the continuous learning process to, with and through the non-human. Its principles are also related to: [*The ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is considered as a core skill. Accurate, up-to-date knowledge is the aim of all connectivist learning. Decision-making is a learning process. What we know today might change tomorrow. While there's a right answer now, it might be wrong tomorrow due to the constantly changing information climate.*] (WGU, 2021)



As connectivism relies greatly on digital technology, a number of numerical learning opportunities are to be valuably used, as it [connectivism]

“provides insight into learning skills and tasks that are needed for learners to flourish in a digital era” (Siemens, 2005: 7).

2.1 Three LSP Teaching Principles

Linking connectivism to teaching principles, an important aspect to be taken into account is the Timing Principle which refers both to the teacher’s speaking time (TST) and to the student’s speaking time (SST). It is closely related to a quote credited to Benjamin Franklin: “tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn”. In order to guarantee students’ knowledge acquisition, the teacher should find ways to involve them as much as possible, during all stages of the lesson. Therefore, TST should be reduced to no more than 30 % of the total class time. This percentage includes the warmer, elicitation and presentation lesson stages. Consequently, SST will take 60% of the total class time, and it will include the controlled practice and the free practice stages.

Another important teaching principle refers to the stages of the lesson. In order to maintain clarity and to successfully follow the pre-established objectives of the lesson, each teaching experience is to be divided into several precise-timed stages. For instance, for a 90-minute teaching session, these stages include the warmer (5 minutes) used to arouse the interest of the students. It so happens that often students are physically present in the classroom, but they do not want to study a foreign

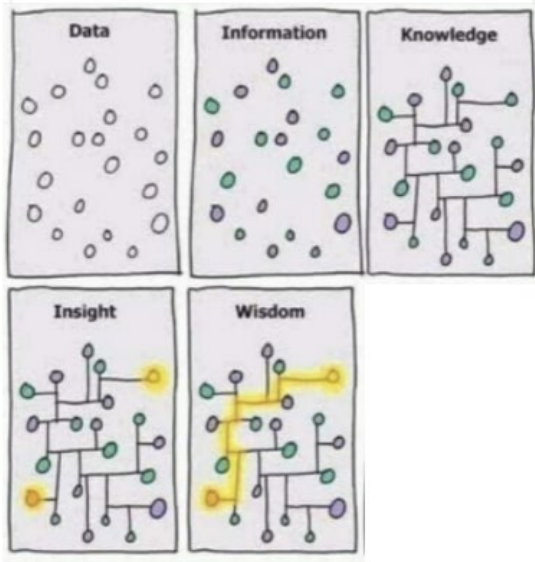
language. It is understandable that they should begin the classroom thinking about their own problems, related to their own lives. Therefore, it is the teacher's job to trick them into the lesson and s/he has countless resources to help: his/her knowledge, experience, gestures, voice, or personal belongings. The second stage is the elicitation (5 minutes) which is used to motivate students to research and think about the chosen topic. To this purpose it should be reasonably brief as not to replace the presentation stage itself. Raising interest can be done in different ways: by bringing the topic closer to the students' personal experience, introducing it under the form of a game or a challenge, under the form of a catchy question, quote, story, testimony, myth or fable. The third stage is the presentation itself (20 minutes). This stage includes the teacher's management of data, information and bibliographical references necessary to support the subject and to develop students' reflections. The next stage is the controlled practice (20 minutes) which represents the body of the lesson - the analysis and deepening of the previously taught notions. The next phase is the free practice (30 minutes) which aims at checking if the student (a) has actually integrated what s/he should have learned, (b) is able to transfer what s/he has learned in another context, (c) is able to self-assess his/her learning, and (d) is capable of using the knowledge in a real-life situation. Feedback and follow-up activities (10 minutes) may follow, and refers to a short review of what has been discussed, to the trainer's explicit statement of class-behavior or to aspects that should be reinforced or polished.

The PPP Principle is strictly linked to the timing principle and it refers to the saying "Poor Practice Prevents Proficiency". Further explanations are, obviously, needless, as the more one practices, the better s/he understands.

Consequently, although the new learning landscape has vastly changed, the data (in terms of subject content and pedagogy) educators had and used before the pandemics is hugely significant, no matter the different contexts. Renewed additional information is just to be added to it. After having been dismissed from the company he himself created, Steve Jobs states that "the heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything" (2005, 7:25), meaning that in a new context one can find more easily ways for being creative and prolific, as the pressure of "already knowing everything" fades away. Consequently, from a learner-centered teaching perspective, connectivism provides, for both students and educators, opportunities to make choices

related to learning and teaching, to be creative and resourceful in the digital era (Rank, 1).

I.Applications of Connectivism in the FSP classroom



Some of the digital learning opportunities and tools that can be used in class are social media, gamification or simulations. Connectivism promotes the idea of developing a networking approach to education, since the learning takes place when the learner is part of a social network and takes control of his/her learning, putting to use digital tools. In fact, in my opinion, the educational and teaching wisdom lies within

the educator’s ability to adapt and upgrade the approaches that would have been used during face-to-face classes, connecting them to technology mediated educational tools.

From a connectivist perspective, connections with students are to be nurtured through activities such as short podcasts or online presentations followed by debates or discussions centered around listening, reading or writing activities. The students should be offered opportunities to connect as much as possible with other people and / or ideas and to be given manifold information sources for them to create their own learning lanes, by use of different collaborative platforms or blogs.

For instance, a first example refers to a type of activity practiced within French Language and Business Communication class. For a specific issue, students first gather, in small groups, relevant and reliable knowledge about that topic, by themselves, by surfing the internet. Obviously, before starting the task, students are told what internet sources are recommended (e.g. peer reviewed journals, trustful TV or radio channels, or reliable social media institutional accounts) in order to avoid as much as possible any biased data. Then, they share their up-to-date

sources with their peers and choose the most trustworthy and valuable ones. Secondly, they search for blogs, podcasts or different social media accounts, being beforehand warned and made aware that on social media one mostly offers individual opinions. Lastly, they orally present to the whole class their findings on the topic, including their own opinions backed by the literature review, and possible work improvements to be undertaken. These findings are to be, later on, uploaded on their own group blog for others to have access to the results. Choosing what to focus on and, ultimately, what to learn, has many benefits for students in today's constantly shifting reality. Even more, a Facebook, Twitter or Instagram group account to form a community of learners for a specific class could also be a way of connecting, involving and motivating students, while the educator directs and facilitates their continual learning process (Peachey, 2018).

A second example brings up gamification which puts students in competitive and interactive situations of learning. In terms of technology mediated educational activities, platforms such as Kahoot or Mentimeter offer a modality of combining the presentation of the information with quizzes and questionnaires which test the understanding, empowering students into learning and creating collaboration. An example of gamification integrated within the class activities is when students include a Kahoot quiz at the beginning, end or in the middle of their oral presentations on different topics, in order to increase peer attention and involvement, and to pre-test, test or posttest what they have understood.

Another example is the Mentimeter platform which integrates in a joyful way the possibility of adding systematic and precise content, while offering instant and detailed feedback, during all the stages of a lesson. An example of certain stages of a French Language and Business Communication lesson, for A2+ students, can be found on Mentimeter, at <https://www.mentimeter.com/s/9349e174a9a1eb60522260f9f1dd66be/39a991c54bb8>. The topic of the lesson refers to employment searching and the session includes, at first, a warm-up under the form of a short video. The story presented in the video is of a young person, of 23, who is looking for a job and shares his thoughts, fears and questions, while giving pieces of advice on useful contextual information, such as on what to include in a Curriculum Vitae or on how to answer during an interview. The following lead-in activity is a brainstorming type of exercise in which students write words related to the topic directly on the screen, for everybody to see.

Mentimeter offers the enjoyable feature of allowing users to create instantaneous word clouds. The subsequent controlled reading activity consists of a job search announcement succeeded by questions to check the understanding of the text.

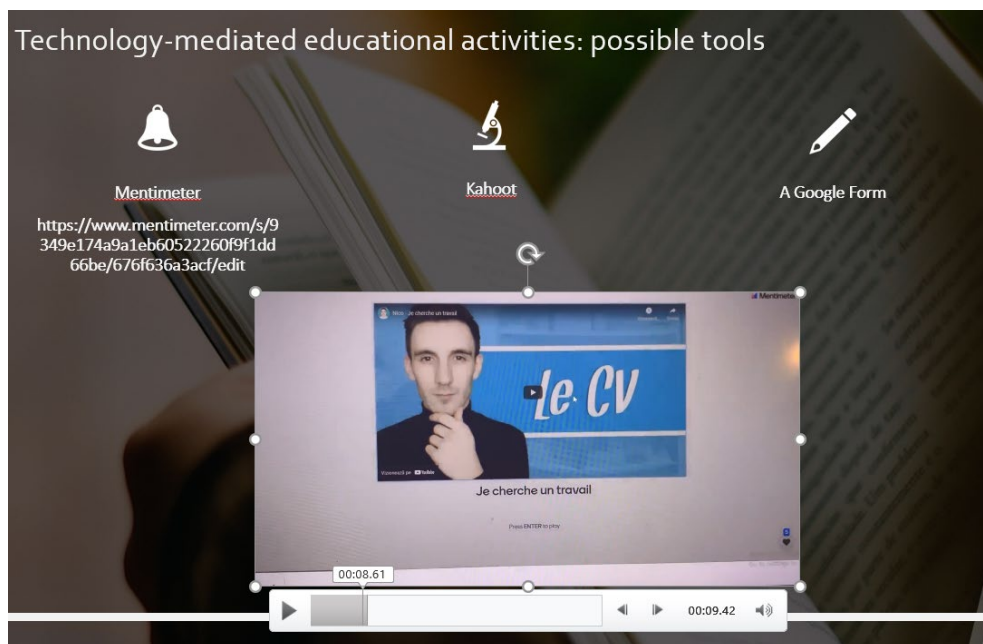


Image 1: Digital tools used in French Language and Business Communication classes

The platform allows the educator to include joyful instant feedback for each type of question while also offering the correct answer. As a result, students are pleasantly required by the exercises themselves to be active throughout the class activities, and teaching can become agreeable and memorable “in two clicks”.

Simulations – such as role plays, assigned characters or business simulations – offer, on the one hand, a practice opportunity for students to show what they have learned, and, on the other, an interactive means to practice real world activities. For instance, an example of an exercise type practiced during French Language and Business Communication classes includes an initial requirement when students are given a real-life situation. Then they are asked to generate by themselves a dialogue that will be presented, further on, to the whole class. Even more, simulations can be broadened up with stories. Within educational activities one should never

neglect the everlasting importance of a good story, either a motivational one, a fable, or a memorable discourse such as Steve Job's Stanford Commencement Address. These stories can, of course, be digital, under the form of a YouTube video, a podcast or a short film. Simulations are to be included within the longest sequence of the lesson, i.e., the free practice stage, where students have to put into practice by themselves the studied notions. Beforehand, in groups, they should think about and debate upon a number of issues, such as the form and content of their simulation which should be readable, consistent, simple, audience centered, concise and grammatically correct, among others. If applicable, students also design effective slides, write readable content, create charts with data and highlight key points of their own-created content. Another issue to consider is the presentation method, they will either learn by heart, read or present from notes. The PPP Principle is an important aspect in terms of overcoming anxiety and fear of speaking in public. The last stage of this type of activity should include feedback aspects. The teacher offers neither too much nor too little correction throughout the students' work, in order not to hinder the transmission of the message. At the end, s/he resumes common and repeated mistakes. Students might also be asked to offer peer feedback if asked to answer questions such as: "What did I expect to learn and what have I learned". Simulation activities examples within the French Language and Business Communication class consist of asking students to work in pairs or in groups to create a dialogue on tips to be used when dealing with a disgruntled or insulting customer or to create an online survey on different topics (e.g., online jobs, how to deal with stress, how to address a complaint, etc.) using different media features and tools such as Google forms.

An example of another activity that includes both gamification and simulation, under the form of a competition, can consist of inviting students to create an oral business presentation of an object, service or activity that delights and enthuses them, from an economic, i.e., commercial perspective. Of all the submitted presentations they are asked to vote for the best one, based on previously discussed voting criteria. Full-featured and free voting apps are to be found online with a simple search and surveys are easily generated. The winner will be posted on the institutional Facebook page of the Applied Modern Languages university program, as a form of reward on social media.

Another design of a technology mediated FSP class activity includes film screening. For instance, under the title *L'humanité mise au travail*, students are invited to watch parts of the 2013 movie *Les Profs* on YouTube. The plot of the movie speaks about the worst teachers who are chosen to teach in the worst high school in France. The final results at the Baccalaureate are a disaster, so the high school needs to be closed. Nonetheless, what if everyone teamed up and joined forces, showing humanity and collaboration, would there be a chance for the high school not to be closed? After learning broadly about the plot of the movie and watching parts of it, students are asked to predict the end. They are also asked to talk about the good and bad characteristics of a teacher. What features and idiosyncrasies does a teacher need to be considered good, clement, cool, in short, great? It has proven to be an amusing activity firstly generated by the movie plot and latterly by the discussions themselves.

II. Creating and sharing one's personal learning dots

In order to understand the real linguistic needs of foreign language learners and to contextualise concrete instances of the use of educational tools in language learning, I applied a qualitative survey to students of French Language and Business Communication. The survey carried out among 63 students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies confirmed the theoretical orientations on connectivism. From the point of view of the profile of the respondents, all the respondents are students enrolled in the first year of study at the Faculty of International Business and Economics, from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. They learn French for specific purposes, as a second foreign language. The survey was carried out in October 2021, during the 2nd pandemic year. I analyzed their answers to questions concerning their online educational experiences, and linguistic performance and expectations in the target language. All respondents are of Romanian nationality. The graphs and the results are presented in the Annex attached at the end of the paper, and Question 1 (Q1) and Q2 refer to the profile of the respondents.

For Q3 - *What do you prefer: online education or face to face classes?* - 83,3% of the respondents stated that they prefer face to face classes, while merely 16,7 % would favor online education. For Q4 - *Do you consider useful the use of different internet resources in online learning?* – all respondents (i.e. a percentage of 100%) stated that technology mediated educational activities

are beneficial, given their own experience. In terms of relevant class forms, for Q5 - *Which of the following class types in online learning do you consider most relevant for your educational development?* -, 53,8% of the respondents favor interactive seminars. A percentage of 23,1 % prefer having debates, 15,4 % consider seminars as most valuable for their educational development, and only 7,7% find courses relevant. Q 6 (*What online learning tools do you consider most useful?*) refers to the technology mediated instruments considered the most suitable in the educational process. A percentage of 38.5 % of the respondents find that gamification applications are useful, 30,8% prefer Zoom meetings, 15,4% state that working on their university institutional platform is more convenient, while only 7,7 % prefer watching thematic videos on a specific topic. Their answers are meant to improve online French Language and Business Communication classes, from the educator's perspective. As to be seen in the *Image* included in the Annex, when asked to remember and consider their last year online education experience, all respondents argued that interactive classes, including competitive activities, thematic games and activities are significant. Over 67% of the respondents stated that they would prefer that the language used by the teacher to be both academic and jovial. All respondents argued they would prefer explanations of grammatical structures to be included within free discussions.

No matter the context, students require dynamic activities, appreciate when they are all actively involved and think that lively interaction between themselves as peers and between themselves and the teacher are highly valuable. In their opinion, interactivity helps them all in solving instructions that would expand their further knowledge over a long period of time.

III. Conclusions

To exemplify possible best practices for an effective learning of foreign languages in the online environment, I have chosen for this paper the formula of a testimonial of the technology mediated educational activities that I use in French Language and Business Communication classes. I introduced the Connectivism learning theory which I exemplified with practical activities that proved to be welcome by the students, according to the applied qualitative questionnaire.

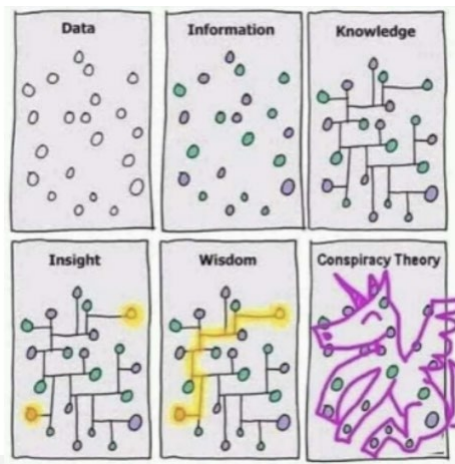


Image 2: Internet image, unknown source.

Educators are to build on what they already know in terms of content and pedagogy and to put to the best possible use the technology mediated educational platforms and applications provided by the online environment. All educators want to influence their students into learning and applying content in context. The best way to influence somebody is to create a connection with them, which implies showing trust and openness.

More specifically, this scholastic influence has a twofold meaning. On

the one hand, it means that by creating connections and links one can, in due course, reach an original idea. As the image on the left shows, the first square displays the data that exists, while the second one shows data dots filled with relevant information. In the third frame connections are created between pieces of information or between people in order to discover relevant knowledge. The 4th rectangular highlights the ideas and insights that may appear from the previously created links. Then, as shown in the 5th and the 6th squares, these ideas are linked together to ultimately shape a developed, unique, personal and supreme idea (humorously presented in the image under the form of a unicorn). On the other hand, the above-mentioned scholastic influence also implies that links should be created between the educator and the students, no matter the channel of communication, be it the online environment which is similar to a fantastic unicorn that, strangely enough, has all the elements to connect the learning dots quite successfully.

Annex

Questionnaire distributed to first year students of the Faculty of International Business and Economics, from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies on their online education experience and preferences

Table 1: Q3 - 83,3% of the respondents stated that they prefer F2F classes, while 16,7 % favor online education.

What do you prefer online education or face to face classes?

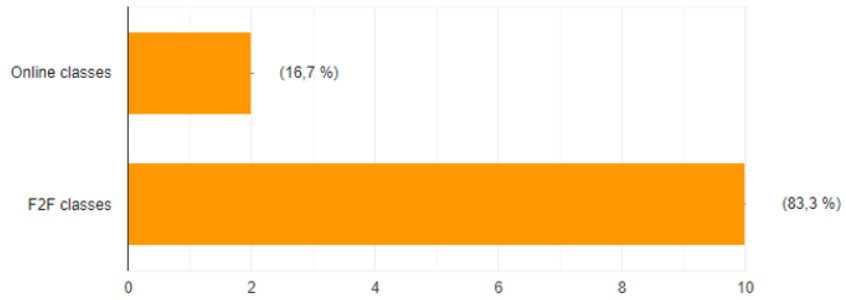


Table 2: Q4 - 100 % of the respondents find that the use of different internet resources in the online learning environment is beneficial.

Do you consider useful in online learning the use of different internet resources?



Table 3: Q5- 53,8% of the respondents prefer interactive seminar, 23,1 % prefer having debates, 15,4 % think seminars are the most valuable and 7,7% find courses relevant

Which of the following class types in online learning do you consider most relevant for your educational development?

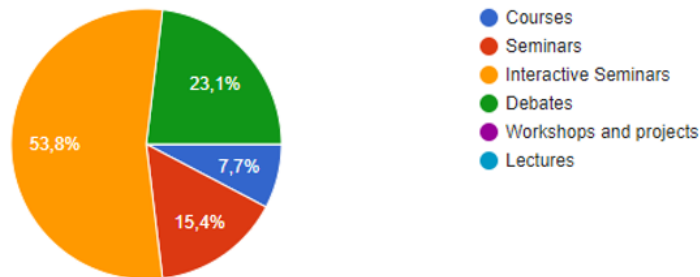
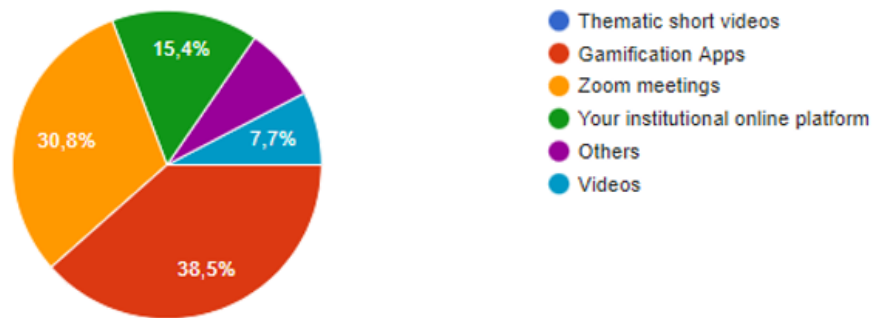


Table 4: Q 6 - 38.5 % of the respondents find that gamification applications are useful, 30,8% prefer Zoom meetings, 15,4% argue that working on their university institutional platform is more opportune, and 7,7 % prefer watching thematic videos on a specific topic.

What online learning tools do you consider the most useful?



What are the online learning activities you remember? Why do you think you still remember them?

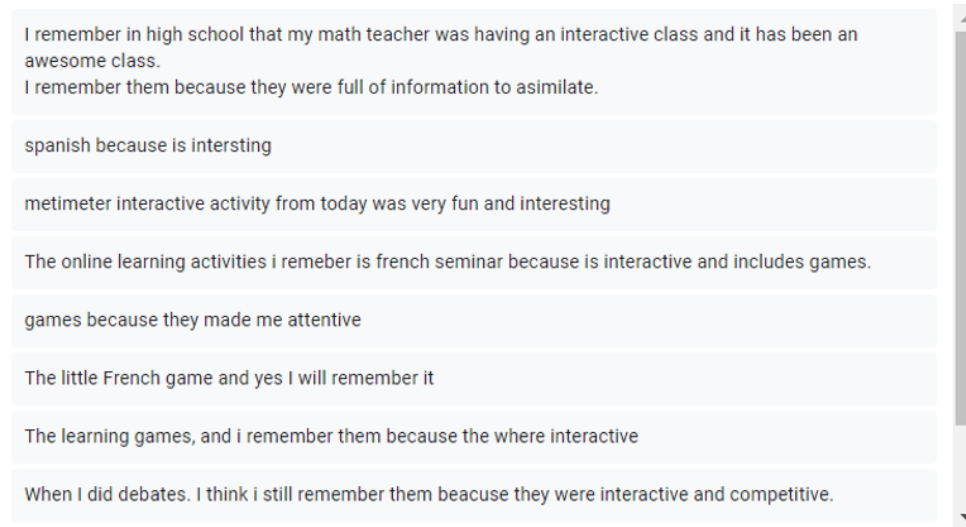


Image: Students' answers related to the memories they have of their last year experience with online education.

References and bibliography

1. BURKE, Shawn (2012) *Connectivism*, Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-20Oqm1GvsU&ab_channel=ShanBurke. Accessed on 4 October 2021.
2. JOBS, Steve (2005), *Stanford Commencement Address*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc&ab_channel=Stanford Accessed on 5 October 2021.
3. PEACHY, Tom (2018), *Digital Tools for Teachers, Trainers' Edition*. Retrieved from peachypublications.com and <https://peachypublications.com/connectivism-for-the-elt-classroom> Accessed on 4 October 2021.
4. RANK, Pamela. *Using Connectivism Theory in the Classroom*, Teaching Tips/ Notes, NACTA Journal, Iowa State University. Retrieved from https://www.nactateachers.org/images/TeachingTips/004_Using_Connectivism_Theory_in_the_Classroom.pdf#:~:text=There%20has%20been%20much%20debate%20over%20whether%20Connectivism,in%20

- a%20digital%20era%E2%80%9D%20%28Siemens%2C%202005%2C%20p.%207%29, Accessed on 5 October 2021.
- (1) SHAGADAR, Zolzaya. *Connectivism - A Learning theory*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvhY70C6Drk&ab_channel=ZolzayaShagdar, Accessed on 6 October 2021.
 5. SIEMENS, George (2005), *Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age*. Retrieved from http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Jan_05/article01.htm. International Journal of Instructional Technology & Distance Learning 2(1). Accessed on 4 October 2021.
 6. SIEMENS, George (2006), *Knowing Knowledge*, Creative Commons. Retrieved from www.knowingknowledge.com. Accessed on 5 October 2021.
 7. *** 2021. *Connectivism Learning Theory*. Western Governors University. Retrieved from <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/connectivism-learning-theory2105.html#close>. Accessed on 3 October 2021.