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**Inovação e Tecnologia no Ensino de Línguas:
Reflexões e Perspetivas de Ação
em Contextos Educacionais Diversos**

**Innovation and Technology in Language Teaching:
Reflections and Perspectives on Action
in Different Educational Context**

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Innovation and Technology in Language Teaching:
Reflections and Perspectives on Action in Different Educational Context

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USING VOICE RECORDING APPS TO HELP SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is considered a major challenge in foreign language learning and communication by many students and, unarguably, it is one of the most important skills to develop in the EFL classroom. However, helping students acquire oral performance in the foreign language is not always an easy task. According to Aoki, S. (2014: 130): “voice recording tools have been introduced and used in a variety of ways in language instruction in an attempt to provide learners with opportunities to produce oral output,” nevertheless, classroom practice and research show that these present not only opportunities, but also challenges for both teachers and learners.

Ultimately aiming to help students' speaking skills performance, this study explores the use of voice recorder apps in different pedagogical tasks (Nunan, 2004), which were used in a B1 EFL class at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa over one semester. Students were asked to make their own recordings and invited to reflect on the process of oral language acquisition by means of self-reflection charts. Data collection was based on the recordings, the students' charts and a final evaluation questionnaire in order to assess whether motivation tools such as smartphone voice recording apps can be used to help create language awareness, allowing “the student to reflect on the process of language acquisition, learning and language use” (Bilash and Tulasiewicz, 1995: 49), which will in turn help learners gain confidence and enhance their speaking skills.

Keywords: ICT, voice recorder apps, EFL, speaking skills, language awareness

1_INTRODUCTION

Since the internationalization of higher education that followed the Bologna process, English has become a requirement for most undergraduate courses in European universities. This growing demand for English has brought new challenges for both learners and teachers, particularly for the EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers.

At the Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP), a higher education institution in Portugal, more faculties want to ensure that students have a level of English language proficiency that guarantees success in the job market and, therefore, students are asked to take an English placement test at the beginning of each academic year.

This study was conducted in the context of the UCP Law Faculty, which requires the B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for all undergraduates. The students whose EFL proficiency is below the minimum standard are required to enroll in extra non-curricular courses offered by the faculty.

In fact, although the majority of undergraduates have reached the B2 level by the time they enter university, every year there are, nevertheless, quite a number of students who need to take one or more levels of the extra EFL courses. Apart from national students, these classes are also attended by international students from various countries, including those from the *Community of Portuguese Language Countries* (CPLP), also known as the lusophone commonwealth, for which English is often the third foreign language; Portuguese being their first foreign or second language.

The courses aim to improve students' communicative competence and help them gain confidence to interact in real contexts. Many students who attend the extra EFL courses suffer from what Horwitz calls “language anxiety” (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986) and lack the confidence to speak English outside the classroom. On the other hand, motivation also plays a key role, because, as the majority of undergraduates are exempt, the minority who needs to enroll often feels stigmatized by the additional burden of extra classes and homework.

Choosing the best methodology and stimuli to promote motivation and opportunities to practice speaking inside and outside the classroom becomes, therefore, of paramount importance in the context of such EFL courses and this is where the implementation of voice recording activities has proved useful. This study aims to analyze how such pedagogical activities worked in practice.

Although the use of voice recording in foreign language teaching is not new, and may even bring to memory the repetitive drills recorded by millions of students in language labs under the influence of the audio-lingual method, the current built-in voice recording apps seem to have brought groundbreaking opportunities for language instruction (Sad, S., 2008; Zhang, L., 2013; Aoki, S., 2014). According to Aoki (2014: 131), voice recording tools also offer “possibilities of promoting learners’ awareness through self-reflection and self-assessment of their own recordings,” and so raising language awareness strategies were also incorporated into the study as a means to help “the student to reflect on the process of language acquisition, learning and language use” (Bilash and Tulasiewicz, 1995: 49) and gain consciousness of the forms and functions of spoken language.

While exploring the use of voice recording apps to improve students’ speaking performance, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Can the use of voice recording apps motivate students to speak more English in the EFL classroom?
2. Can the voice recordings help students to develop language awareness, allowing them to reflect on the process of language learning and language use?
3. Does reflection on the process of language practice and acquisition help students gain confidence and enhance speaking performance in the foreign language?

2_ LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The EFL courses offered by the Law Faculty are divided into four levels, roughly corresponding to the first four CEFR levels (A1, A2, B1 and B2). Each course lasts one semester and usually comprises two 90 minute sessions per week, leading to a total of 36 hours per semester. Students are placed into the levels according to the diagnostic test results. Although the courses are not awarded any ECTS credits, the students are required to reach a B2 level prior to graduation, so it is in their best interest to take the courses as early as possible.

The study is designed to be longitudinal and last three to four semesters, covering the use of voice recording tools in the four levels of the EFL courses offered by the Law Faculty. This paper summarizes the results of the first stage of the research observed during the 2018-19 Level III course.¹

The syllabus follows the CEFR guidelines and requirements for the B1 intermediate level. It aims at building on students’ prior knowledge of the English language and help to improve reading, writing and speaking skills. The main focus of the course is on general English, but because it is designed for law students, the choice of topics and vocabulary are often related to law and legal issues. A range of grammar structures are also covered, particularly verb tenses.

Classes are usually small, which facilitates teacher-student relationship and provides a friendly environment for students who feel intimidated by the speaking activities. The 2018-19 Level III class had four students, three spoke Portuguese as their mother language, two students from Portugal and one from Angola. The fourth student was from Macau, a former Portuguese colony, and spoke Cantonese as mother language and Portuguese as a second language.

The students were introduced to the voice recording activities right at the beginning of the course, responded rather enthusiastically to the project and agreed to use their own smartphones for the purpose of the ELF recordings in class.

¹ The initial plan included observation of Levels I and III during the 2018-19 Winter Term, but no students enrolled in Level I that year. Levels I and III are offered during the Winter semester and levels II and IV during the Summer semester. Further data are being collected at the time of publication.

3_METHODODOLOGY

The methodology used for the purpose of this study is task-based which is defined by Nunan (2004: 4) as "classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language" and "in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form." The focus on meaning and the fact students are required to actively participate in the learning process adjust particularly well to the speaking tasks designed for the course.

Four tasks were planned according to the topics in the syllabus, each one including one recording. They all followed three phases according to Ellis' model (2010: 7):

Phase	Options
A. Pre-task	* Introduction to topic through a set of questions projected on Power Point. * Sharing ideas + Vocabulary and grammar clarification.
B. During Task	* Students are given 5-10 min to prepare topic for recording. Note-taking not allowed. * Students produce a short recording on the topic, impromptu and in one take.
C. Post-Task	* Students listen to the recordings individually, with earplugs, and fill in self-assessment charts (appendix 1)

Table 1. Tasks Plan

After the first three recordings students had the opportunity to analyze and correct the recording scripts in pairs and discuss them with the teacher.

All the phases took place during class time, except for phase B, recording 4, which was given for homework. The longest recording produced in class was 2':14'' so recording time for all students was quite short.

At the end of the semester, students filled in a questionnaire which covered questions on the recording tasks and their speaking performance (Appendix 2).

4_DRAWBACKS

Although the students welcomed the project rather enthusiastically, two shortcomings surfaced during the project. The first is related to students' attendance to classes, a topic which will not be addressed in this paper, but which had an impact on the number of recorded activities used for the study. The second issue is associated with the unexpected refusal on the part of the Macanese student to participate in any of the recordings done in class.

Participation was generally good when students came to class, but unfortunately students shared different attendance patterns. As a matter of fact, at a micro-level, this pattern could be rather representative of UCP extra courses: student 1 is the committed student who comes to every class and does all the work; student 2 is a working student who occasionally misses classes, but always does homework and student 3 reached the limit of unexcused absences in the semester and seldom did his homework. Student 4 was the student from Macau who always came to class and always did his homework but refused to join the recording activities.

The fact that this student was not able to join the impromptu recording activities in the class was rather surprising even for himself, as he attempted to overcome anxiety and record every activity before finally giving up. Cultural problems of this sort are addressed in EFL literature by several authors (Krashen, 1982; Harmer, 2007; Aoki, 2014) and as Harmer (2007, as cited in Aoki, 2014: 128) argues: " 'good learning' methods for western cultures might differ from the ones for eastern cultures [...] He argues that if the students are not motivated to communicate, *it might be because of their educational background rather than their lack of enthusiasm* [emphasis added]."

In fact, this student from Macau was eager to participate in speaking activities in class as long as they were not recorded. Task number four was set for homework and this managed to motivate most students, including the Macanese student.

5_RESULTS

Although the number of participants was too small to generalize beyond the context of this study or to assess a pattern, the results presented in Table 2 revealed progress between tasks for every student regarding recording times and number of words spoken.

	RECORDING 1 EDUCATION	RECORDING 2 SOCIAL NETWORKS	RECORDING 3 CRIME	RECORDING 4 THE ENVIRONMENT
STUDENT 1	00':52'' (52 words)	02':08'' (130 words)	02':14'' (171 words)	4':06''
STUDENT 2	1':00'' (74 words)	X	1':55'' (114 words)	3':43''
STUDENT 3	00':31'' (61 words)	X	1':05'' (111 words)	X
STUDENT 4	—	—	—	1':20''

Table 2. Recordings Register

This increase of recording times and number of words spoken may reveal an increase in confidence as learners gain experience on the use of recording tools for the purpose of practicing English skills.

On the other hand, the questionnaires revealed that the scripts had helped students understand and correct their mistakes, as well as improve their writing. Students' attitudes towards their errors also showed a preference for correction, as the four participants reported that the teacher should always "correct their speaking mistakes" and two said that they would like the teacher to "interrupt them every time they made a mistake."

Recordings 4 were produced at home and, therefore, were longer than the spontaneous versions recorded in class. Most sounded rehearsed or over-rehearsed, however, these recordings may have resulted in positive motivation as in the questionnaires responses students acknowledge they had enjoyed recording themselves at home and would like to do it again. One student reported that he had shared the recordings with other people.

As for motivation, two students reported that they had found the recording activities "very motivating," one found them "motivating" and one said they were "scary." Similarly, two students perceived they felt "very comfortable" during the recordings in class and the other two admitted they had felt "a little" and "very uncomfortable."

General attitude to speaking English as a foreign language in real contexts was generally negative as two students recognized they feel either "uncomfortable" or "a little uncomfortable" when speaking to foreigners or international students at UCP. However, this attitude changed when asked about how they felt when speaking English in class, as three students reported they "loved" speaking English in class and one reported that he "liked" it.

The questionnaires also revealed that most students expressed some concern in all the assessed speaking categories (fluency, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, communication effectiveness and confidence), but reported that the recordings had helped them to enhance confidence.

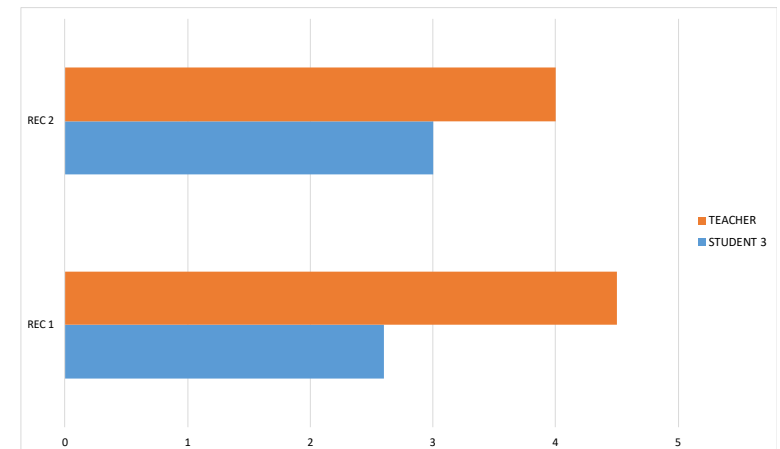
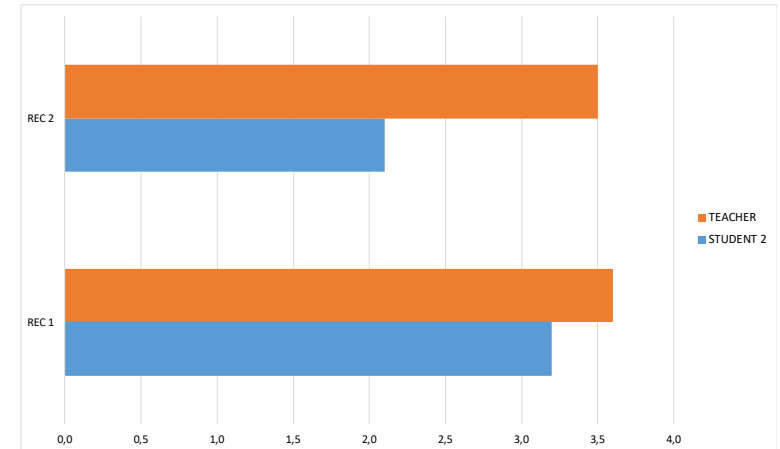
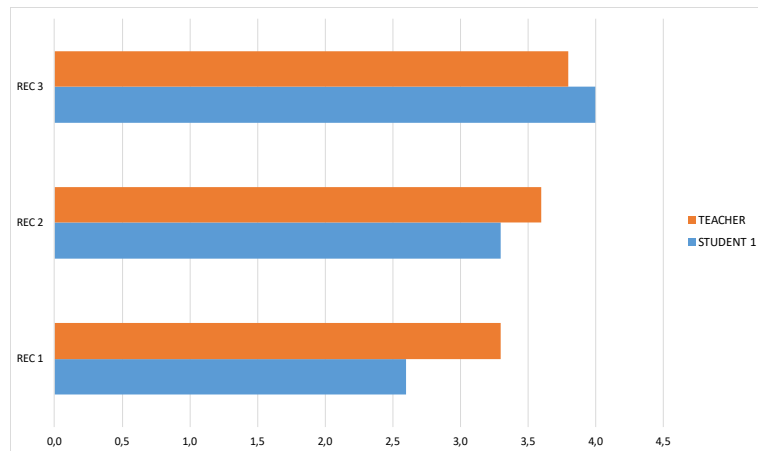
6_ASSESSING SPEAKING ABILITY

The purpose of self-assessment is to help learners develop awareness of speaking skills, as well as of mistakes and assist them in developing strategies of improvement. As Nicol *et al* (2006, as cited in Babaii *et al*, 2016) observe: "L2 speaking assessment, nowadays, calls for more formative assessment which is a key to assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning." This purpose was explained to the students before they filled in the assessment charts.

Students were given a copy of the chart (appendix 1) and asked to complete them as they listened to their own recordings. They gave a mark out of five for each category and a mark for overall performance based on general impression. When all four tasks had been assessed, they peer-reviewed each other's charts and shared comments.

The teacher's assessment for every activity was then shared with the students, so they would evaluate the differences between the teacher's criteria and their personal criteria.

For the purpose of comparative analysis between the teacher's and the student's scorings the mean between all criteria was calculated. The results for the three students who participated in two or three recordings are shown in the graphs below. Recording 4 was excluded from these graphs, because it had been recorded at home.



Generally speaking, the students assessed their own recordings worse than the teacher did, except for student 1, recording 3, although the difference is insignificant (3.8 compared to 4).

Students 1 and 3 recorded progress between recordings, a positive outcome as it may reveal improved self-confidence. On the other hand, student 2 assessed the second recording worse than the first one, which may denote lack of self-confidence, particularly because the scoring is in disagreement with the teacher's assessment, which was similar for both recordings.

Kumaravadivelu (1994, as cited in Babaii *et al*, 2016), calls attention to possible perceptual mismatches among teachers and learners, or what he refers to as "teacher intention" and "learner interpretation" and to the effect such mismatches may have on the success and failure of the learning and teaching processes. In this sense, open discussion and analysis of assessment results helped to clarify such differences and misunderstandings.

7_ CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study was conducted with a limited number of students and over a period of one semester. The results may have been different had the activities been done with a larger number of students and over a longer period of time.

Another limitation is that the recording activities failed to motivate one Asian student.

On the other hand, the small number of students and the relaxed friendly environment allowed for positive student-to-student interaction under the teacher's supervision and improved rapport between students and teacher. Likewise, it also helped to reduce the levels of anxiety learners experienced when speaking in the foreign language, which may affect speaking performance negatively.

Another positive outcome is that the voice recording tools were straightforward to use. They are free and easy to share by email, WhatsApp or through the Moodle platform.

Furthermore, self-evaluation and peer-evaluation were simple to implement because the recordings were easily stored. Another advantage is that the students were able to build up a collection of recordings that show the progress they have made over a period of time and even keep some of their classmates' recordings as models.

Questionnaires suggest that the recording activities were motivating for most students and helped to enhance confidence. Students also reported that script analysis and self-assessment charts provided greater self-awareness of mistakes and speaking performance, as well as further motivation to practice speaking.

Further research is needed with a larger number of participants.

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Her research interests include Applied Linguistics, Register and Genre Theory, Multimodality, Action Research in EFL teaching and learning.

APPENDIX 1

VOICE RECORDING SELF-ASSESSMENT CHART

NAME: _____

	FLUENCY (pauses, hesitations false starts)	GRAMMAR (accuracy, variety of structures)	VOCAB. (appropriateness variety of expressions)	PRONUNCIATION (stress, rhythm, intonation)	COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS (clarity of ideas, comprehensible speech)	CONFIDENCE (anxiety-free speech)	OVERALL PERFORMANCE
REC 1							
REC 2							
REC 3							
REC 4							
REC 5							
REC 6							

APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

1. How do you rate your level of spoken English? (Please select only one answer)

I cannot communicate in English	
I have a basic level of spoken English	
I have an intermediate level of spoken English	
I have a high level of spoken English	

2. How do you feel speaking with the following people in English?

	Very uncomfortable	A little uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Very comfortable
The teacher				
Your classmates				
International students at UCP				
Foreigners you don't know				

3. How much do you like speaking English in class? (Please select only one answer)

I don't like speaking English in class	
I like speaking English in class	
I love speaking English in class	

4. How did you feel when you recorded your voice in English?

	Very uncomfortable	A little uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Very comfortable
During the first recording I felt				
During the second recording I felt				
During the third recording I felt				
When I recorded myself at home I felt				

5. Did you enjoy listening to your recordings?

	hated it	didn't like it very much	thought it was ok	enjoyed it
When I listened to the first recording I...				
When I listened to the second recording I...				
When I listened to the third recording I...				
When I recorded myself at home I...				

6. How many times did you listen to your recordings? (Please select only one answer)

I only listened to them once in class	
I listened to my recordings once more at home alone	
I listened to my recordings more than once at home alone	
I listened to my recordings alone and with other people	

7. Reading the scripts...

	Not at all	A little	A lot
Helped me realize my mistakes			
Helped me correct my mistakes			
Made my speaking sound worse than I thought			
Made my speaking sound better than I thought			
Helped me to improve my writing			

8. I found that the main problem areas in my speaking were...

	Not at all	A little	A lot
Fluency (pauses, hesitations, false starts)			
Grammar (accuracy, variety of structures)			
Vocabulary (appropriateness, variety of expressions)			
Pronunciation (stress, rhythm, intonation)			
Communication Effectiveness (clarity of ideas, comprehensible speech)			
Confidence (anxiety-free speech)			

**9. How should the teacher correct my speaking mistakes?
(Please select only one answer)**

Interrupt me every time I make a mistake	
Ask me to stop half way through my speech to give me corrections	
Wait until the end of my speech	
Give me written feedback	

10. Please select only one answer to the following questions:

	Not at all	A little	A lot
Did you find the recording activities motivating?			
Did you find the recording activities scary?			
Do you feel your spoken English improved between recordings 1 and 3?			
Would you like to continue doing more recording activities?			

Do you have any comments on how to work on speaking in the EFL class?
