

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING USING ZOOM: A REPORT OF EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: The social distancing restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 have confirmed the demand for alternatives to teaching English classes. An already growing field of research in technologies applied to education was boosted by the urgent need to emulate a synchronic classroom environment. Several video conferencing software such as Zoom has become a reliable alternative tested in educational institutions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to report the experience of using the Zoom videoconference tool and other digital tools for mediating the teaching of English as an additional language within the context of English teaching for individual and group classes to attend the demand of private schools in Brazil. To do that, two different teaching contexts were described as well as the uses of Zoom platform as its main teaching resource throughout the year were presented. In addition, the teachers evaluate the conference software based on educational framework studies focusing on linguistic, pedagogical, user experience, and technological criteria to compare their strengths and weaknesses. The results of these experiences indicate that Zoom has contributed in a positive way to mediate and enhance the teaching and learning of English for both teachers and students regarding their experience with the remote learning context.

Keywords: Report of Experience; Zoom Videoconference; EFL.

O ENSINO DE LÍNGUA INGLESA UTILIZANDO O ZOOM: UM RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIAS

Resumo: No ano de 2020, as restrições de distanciamento social impostas pela pandemia da Covid-19 confirmaram a demanda por alternativas para o ensino de língua Inglesa. Um campo já crescente de pesquisa em tecnologias aplicadas à educação foi impulsionado pela necessidade urgente de promover um ambiente síncrono para as aulas. Em vista disso, vários softwares de videoconferência tornaram-se uma alternativa viável para ser explorada em instituições educacionais. Neste artigo, o nosso objetivo é relatar experiências com relação ao uso do software de videoconferência *Zoom* como plataforma para mediar o ensino do Inglês como língua adicional no contexto do ensino em aulas individuais e em grupo, de maneira a atender à demanda de escolas privadas no Brasil. Para isso, descrevemos dois estudos de caso, os distintos contextos de ensino e como os professores envolvidos propuseram o uso da plataforma Zoom em suas práticas de ensino. Para melhor explorar a ferramenta, foi feita análise inicial do software com base em estudos prévios, avaliando critérios linguísticos, pedagógicos, experiência do usuário e tecnológicos de modo a identificar aspectos positivos e negativos da plataforma. Os resultados indicam que o Zoom tem contribuído de forma positiva para mediar e

aprimorar o ensino e a aprendizagem da língua inglesa, tanto dos professores quanto dos alunos. Com relação à experiência de ensino remoto, a ferramenta possui características que podem potencializar o trabalho colaborativo e a interação do aluno pelo seu envolvimento em diferentes atividades.

Palavras-chave: Relato de Experiência, Zoom Vídeo conferência; EFL.

1. Introduction

Applied Linguistics studies published in the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning usually report a diversity of studies and experiences related to the use of technologies as a support to the teaching and learning processes ([LEFFA et al., 2020](#); [ALMEIDA; VIEIRA; AMORIM, 2020](#); [PAIVA, 2019](#); [REIS, 2017](#)). However, few studies explain how to handle videoconference software to meet the interests and the needs of language students that are unable to attend face-to-face classes, mainly since the unexpected appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even though the pandemic has increased the use of videoconference software to supply the demand of millions of students worldwide, most of the teachers around the world had never used these tools in their daily teaching practice. Although there is an extensive list of options of videoconference software available online, there is still the need to adapt and explore these resources properly for educational purposes.

Taking this setting into account, this paper aims at reporting the experience of using the Zoom videoconference tool and other digital artifacts for mediating the teaching of English as an additional language within the context of English teaching for individual and group classes to attend the demand of private schools in Brazil. Furthermore, we also sought to answer the questions: how Zoom's features and other digital tools can mediate the teaching and learning processes of English as an additional language? How do these digital artifacts allow teachers to promote language practice within remote teaching? These research questions are built based on the fact that videoconferencing platforms provide a vast array of affordances for language learners and teachers, but despite their potential as a teaching resource, there is still a need for proper guidelines to evaluate them.

To achieve the goal proposed in this paper, first of all, the methodology used is described, as well as the context and participants involved in the two case studies compared in this report; second, the technologies used in the experience are analyzed considering their

positive and negative aspects for teaching English as an additional language online; third, the chosen videoconference is described, as well as its implementation and significant results obtained through the cases; finally, we propose the results and discussion based on evaluating the experience of using Zoom in language learning.

2. Method

To investigate and report on the use of Zoom software's potential for mediating the teaching of English as an additional language, we conducted empirical studies based on observation and capturing experiences to plan the steps to carry on the experiment and to analyze it ([MOTTA-ROTH, HENDGES, 2010](#)). In this paper, two case studies are described based on practical classroom experiments and the data collection carried out in two different Brazilian private schools. The online classes registered in both cases studies were recorded on Zoom, and pictures from these moments were taken. To analyze the data produced in both experiences, we consider [Reis and Gomes \(2014\)](#), as well as [Rosell-Aguilar \(2017\)](#) studies, specially the pedagogical and language learning aspects as the main categories to evaluate the experiences. To evaluate the tools used in this report we describe it in section 4 in this paper.

3. Context of application and involved participants in the study

The experiences of both language and teachers involved in this research on using digital technologies started at different times. To report the two cases using the Zoom software, we summarize each one in the following section, giving more details about the context of the application and the participants. In addition, to understand these different experiences, we briefly describe their previous experiences with using videoconferencing tools.

3.1 Case 1 - Private English Classes

The language teacher involved in case 1 initiated non-systematic experimentation with prevailing videoconferencing technologies as an alternative to face-to-face classes in 2016. In

that period, Skype was the first choice of software as it was a well-established brand at that moment. By using this software, the teacher realized that screen sharing was an enormous asset to the virtual class. The possibility to share a PowerPoint presentation or PDF file along with the call was enough to simulate a whiteboard, for instance. However, in their teaching practice with students, Skype was unreliable in average internet speeds, because it required faster download and upload rates on both ends. Additionally, it demanded complicated adjustments on the operating system if it needed to share the sound of a video or audio file as well as the microphone sound.

Even though the advantages of this tool seemed to offer teaching practice, according to this teacher's experience, it was particularly complicated to use this software for listening practice. The lack of interaction from students when it comes to writing and or taking actions through the use of this platform became evident because the attendee could not type or take notes on the shared screen. These issues led this teacher to keep trying and testing other videoconference software such as Google Hangouts and Zoom.

Then, finally, Zoom started to grow in popularity as a more reliable alternative to Skype. As part of the experimentation, this tool was tested in hour-long meetings performing surprisingly well at the beginning of 2017. It was not only faster and more reliable in regular speed connections than the others were, but it also presented easier tools to enhance the experience for both teachers and students. For instance, Zoom had an in-built whiteboard tool that allowed participants to type and draw on the same document as the host, and audio was easy to share alongside participants' microphones. These interactive tools as well as the lowest audio latency during the calls allowed a transition from in-person to online lessons.

This previous experience with Zoom motivated the language teacher involved in case 1 to conduct his private English classes in online practice. This report considers the experience from January 2017 to January 2021. The language lessons varied from one, two, or more sessions a week, depending on the student's availability. Initially, the Zoom's meetings lasted one hour, but the duration was reduced to forty-five minutes in March 2020. On average, there was a constantly changing population of about twenty learners who periodically attended those sessions based on their demands.

The participants were English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who took individual private English language classes solely over videoconference with the same language tutor. They were mostly young adults aged between 18 to 35 years old who sought personalized classes at flexible times for professional or academic reasons.

The lesson content was usually focused on grammar, standardized test preparation, or conversation skills and maintenance. In addition to audio and video communication, these sessions needed screen sharing for whiteboard notes, slide shows, the use of PDF files, and collaborative screen annotations. For this reason, Zoom was used as a means of synchronous communication during the meetings between the tutor and the students for it was the only free software capable of that at the time.

3.2 Case 2 - English Classes in English as Additional Language Private School

Concerning the use of videoconference software, the language teacher in case 2, first of all, used Skype to hold group meetings in extension classes offered by a lab project at the University or to support one-to-one meetings in an attempt to emulate the same environment of a traditional classroom.

Recently, new web conference software came into existence and it also became the focus of study of this language teacher. Just to mention some, there is Zoom, Jitsi Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Big Blue Button, for instance. The features of these pieces of software have been described in previous studies ([MARTIN, 2020](#); [REIS, GODOY, 2019](#); [GERVASIO, 2019](#)), showing that these tools have not only significantly improved the connection stability issues, but it also added a few new features that could be explored and integrated into classes to promote interactivity, such as screen sharing, polls, emoji, and some other extensions that extend their functionalities.

Different from case 1, this second case study was carried on in a private EFL school. The second language teacher used to work with groups of six to eight students in this school, which consisted mostly of children from eight to eleven years old within different English proficiency levels. It is also important to emphasize that, before this experience, the students had never been exposed to online classes, thus learning from an online environment was not

something of their liking or even comfortable for them at first, even though they had the infrastructure and family support necessary to conduct the classes without any problems.

Classes in the school were taught for one hour and ten minutes each, twice a week, and it took place between March and December 2020. During the classes, English was taught using the school's teaching books as the teachers projected and shared the book's online version (PDF or Flash version) with students through Zoom's functionality. By using the material, and considering the lesson plan, it was possible to work the four skills as teachers explored texts, audio, video, and games from the additional resources of the book.

4. Selected Technologies to Teach Online: choosing criteria to evaluate the video conference software to use in online classes

To analyze the videoconference technologies, both teachers selected some well-known software programs to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. As aforementioned, based on our previous experience working with Skype and Google Hangouts, we initially considered non-systemic criteria (for instance, video and audio quality, security, teaching tools, pricing/versions) to identify the software options. At that moment, we did random research to choose the software.

On the other hand, we were concerned about the need to establish systematic criteria to analyze technologies since it is a common research activity in development in the research group GrPesq/CNPq NuPEAD, in which we take part. Because of it, we selected studies of [Reis and Gomes \(2014\)](#), and [Rosell-Aguilar \(2017\)](#) to do a comparative analysis of videoconference software that is currently available to teach online.

[Reis and Gomes \(2014\)](#) propose important criteria and questions to consider when choosing an online teaching resource for educational purposes. According to the authors, these criteria may assist teachers in training and continuing education to efficiently systematize the analysis of the digital tools, regarding Linguistic, Pedagogical, and Technological aspects. In this same perspective, [Rosell-Aguilar \(2017\)](#) proposes a new framework that further explores what the previous authors initially proposed by redesigning and adding a new category, resulting in four categories: technology, user experience,

pedagogy, and language learning. In our analysis, we consider both studies to analyze the videoconferences tools and used the aforementioned categories to analyse the videoconference tools.

In the following section, we present the comparative analysis of the two case studies as well as describe some features of the videoconference software used in the experiences concerning their linguistic, pedagogical, user experience, and technological aspects.

5. Teaching Online using Zoom software in two different contexts

The videoconferencing tool used in both experiences was Zoom. Based on [Reis and Gomes \(2014\)](#), as well as on [Rosell-Aguilar \(2017\)](#), we analyzed the technological and usability aspects from this tool and it showed that Zoom Meetings is a reliable and simple video conference tool to set up and to be used in desktop computers or mobile devices. Even at average link speeds, it enables smoother meetings with decent audio, video, and screen sharing efficiency, which contributes to its stability.

It is important to mention that the Zoom platform also provides helpful support tutorials of how to use its functionalities to its users, such as screen annotations, whiteboard collaboration, audio sharing, breakout rooms, and low-latency video calls are some of its most robust resources for online education that can be accessed through its free version. However, it is necessary to highlight that the platform is free for videoconferences of up to one hundred participants at the same time, with a 40-minute time limit if there are more than two participants. For longer or larger conferences with webinar-like features, paid subscriptions are available. The meetings on Zoom include audio and video files that can be saved locally or to the cloud, with searchable text to work with.

Regarding Zoom's usability, the analysis of this software showed that it has a clean and organized interface for both teachers and students use, once it did not require much knowledge or further explanation of how to use it efficiently. Concerning pedagogical aspects, collaboration is also built-in on Zoom, with participants being able to share their screens and input notes as required. It is important to mention that Zoom allows teachers and students to be proactive, taking control of their agency to benefit and enhance the processes of teaching and learning, and produce knowledge as they use the platform.

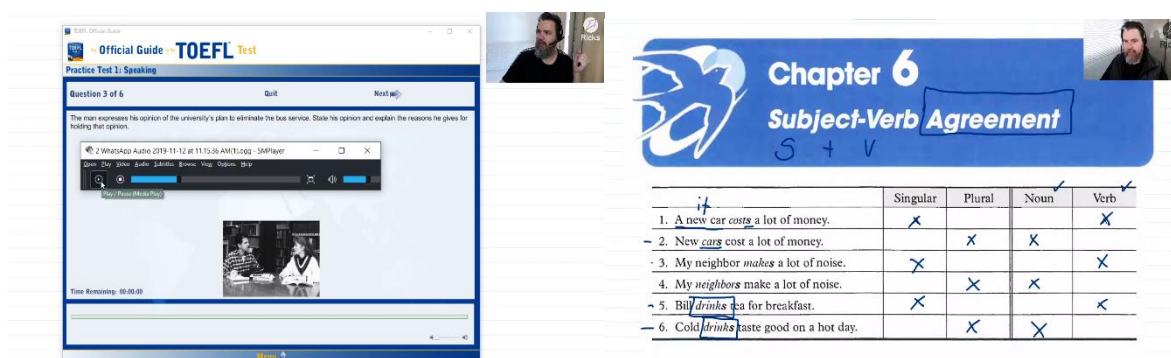
The experience reported in Case 1 used the free version with unlimited meeting time for it was exclusively one-to-one. The content of those private tutoring sessions was catered according to the learner's needs or requests. Among the many possibilities for language learning and training, there were two main demands. The first one was a more traditional tutoring approach with a focus on grammar explanation and vocabulary acquisition. In this model, Zoom's screen sharing and collaborative annotation tools turned out to be extremely useful. This feature enables the instructor to elaborate on the topic as well as it allows the student to annotate their input on the same screen. However, some users found it complicated to operate this tool when doing it for the first time. The process of navigation through the menu to select the annotation tool seemed confusing and time-consuming for some.

Another important software used in Case 1 classes was Open Board, which is free, interactive, and open-source. Combined with Zoom, it empowers the teacher to use a quick and useful multi-screen whiteboard for annotations, drawings, pasting images, and many in-built interactive educational tools. All the annotations taken during the lesson can be easily exported and shared with the students as a PDF file at the end of the session.

The screen-sharing tools were utilized on a computer with two monitors. On the main monitor, the teacher navigates on their primary desktop to look for files, folders, software, and online resources while the secondary monitor is used as a show-only screen, to share the files with the guest. By doing so, the student cannot see everything the teacher is working on their computer to avoid possible distractions.

Figure 1 shows two screens seen from the student's perspective during a meeting. The one on the left shows a grammar class about Subject-Verb agreement in English in which both teacher and learner could annotate and highlight content on the whiteboard simultaneously. The image on the right was taken during a test preparation lesson in which the student was listening to audio files played on the teacher's computer as well as responding to questions asked by the instructor.

Figure 1 - Zoom screen sharing on a grammar lesson (left) and test preparation (right)



Source: authors

In private classes, the second most requested type of lesson was speaking practice with feedback on the learner’s pronunciation and intonation performance. Students also often requested mock academic interviews or job interviews in which they were allowed to record the session on their computers to further analyze it later.

By evaluating the experience of teaching English in one-to-one sessions with Zoom as a teaching platform, it was possible to notice that it has allowed the teacher to adapt the class content to the student’s needs and interests. The teaching objective of explaining different language structures and providing an environment to promote the language speaking skill has been reached due to the use of Zoom’s functionalities such as annotation and screen sharing, as well as extensions like Open Board. Besides, Zoom provides a vast array of options for the teacher to use and to organize his teaching practice as he assists the student in real-time without any delay in his actions, which further increase the student’s immersion in the class, as well as it allows the teacher to provide his student with feedback based on what he needs and when he needs it.

To better illustrate how Zoom was used in Case 2, it is important to highlight that the English teaching involved a group of children who were not used to remote learning or even had online classes at home. To get started with the online classes, as language teachers we needed to study Zoom’s tools and functionalities to connect them with the teaching book material and other activities later implemented to complement the classes taught. As a result, we were surprised to find that we could easily adapt the teaching material by exploring

multimodal resources like audio files, YouTube videos, and shareable documents through Zoom's tools and extensions.

Since it was the first experience for online learning to the students, we found it was necessary to introduce the platform to parents who would later assist their kids and teens in how to connect themselves to our online classes. Therefore, a tutorial on how to install and use Zoom properly was provided and sent to the parents to help them on how to use Zoom's functionalities. Evaluating this action, we consider it was a strategy proposed to guarantee that the parents would be aware of the tool being used in class as well as to promote students' digital fluency and literacy necessary to participate in the online classes. This strategy was significantly positive and easy, as Zoom does not require students a full installation process to access its basic functions when using web browsers.

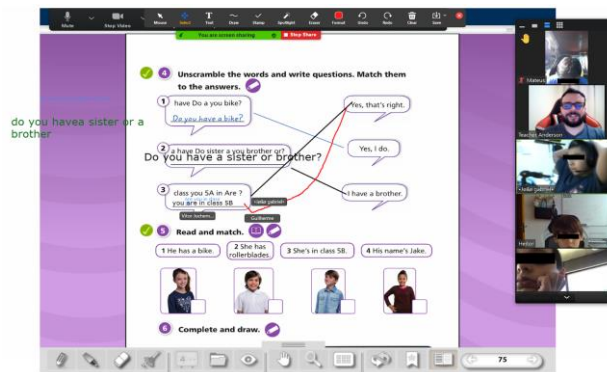
Zoom features enable us to plan our classes according to our teaching objectives, students' proficiency in the language, and communicative events desired to work with to develop the student's language skills. After understanding the platform's tools, we planned and designed our classes to enhance the students' experience by using tools such as PowerPoint presentations, videos, pictures, pdf and documents, music, games, quizzes, collaborative writing through Google Drive, and Annotate, along with the snap camera. Furthermore, we considered investigating how to provide scaffolding and feedback to students based on the tools and teaching resources we had at hand.

In our group classes, we explored the chat, gestures, and breakout rooms to provide each student the assistance they needed. Although Zoom granted the possibility to explore the four language skills taught by the teacher, it was identified that the speaking and writing skills were better developed through the platform due to its functionalities and synchronous support provided when interacting with students. To illustrate how Zoom was explored, Figure 2 shows an activity in which the students should match questions and answers, write their responses regarding personal information and their likes and dislikes, besides reproducing orally the answers provided when directed a question to them.

To promote collaborative work ([NUNAN, 1992](#); [PAIVA, 2019](#); [REIS, 2017](#)), it was decided to set different groups to practice the language as well as to keep an eye on the students, observing their interaction and collaboration in different rooms by using Zoom

breakout rooms functionality. This feature facilitated managing the students properly, allowing us to provide scaffolding and feedback as they practice the language through communicative situations in small groups. In this perspective, it was possible to explore Zoom's potentiality further by establishing an even more interactive class by asking students to take control of their actions by speaking, sharing, and writing on the screen enabling them to have agency and autonomy as they experience different learnings, as we can observe in Figure 2.

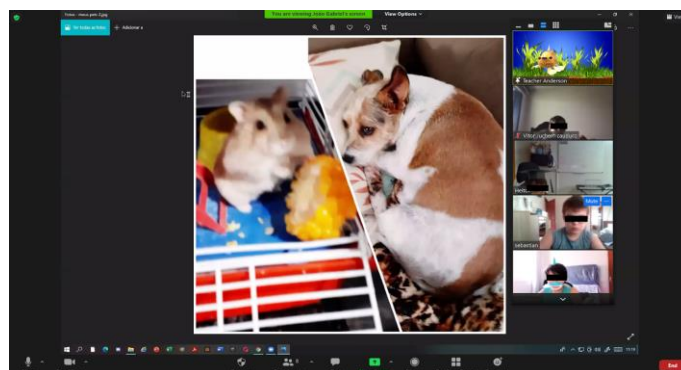
Figure 2 - Students using annotate tools to interact and take part in their learning.



Source: Authors

Other useful resources used for engaging students in online learning contexts were screen sharing, background filters, and extensions like Snap Camera. These resources were explored together to further enhance the class thematic topic of discussion. Figure 3 shows an online class in which we are talking about pets, allowing students to develop confidence and build their arguments as they visualize and identify themselves with different multimodal tools used to describe and talk about their pets' lifestyle and routine, as presented by one of the student's screen sharing in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – The use of background filters and Extensions (Snap Camera)



Source: Author

Still regarding Case 2, evaluating the experience we realized that one of the difficulties of teaching online was to provide collaborative workgroups. However, due to Zoom's functionalities, it was possible to practice collaborative activities as we set different groups in breakout rooms. On the other hand, some assistance was necessary at the beginning, but with time and practice, collaborative work became a habit among students, since we promoted a casual and themed-based online learning context, by using background filters and different extensions like Snap Camera, YouTube, among other sources.

6. Conclusion

This report of experiences paper aimed at describing Zoom's features and the tools used for mediating the teaching of English as an additional language within the context of English teaching to attend to the demand of private schools in Brazil. In addition, we also sought to answer the two research questions about 1) how Zoom's features and tools can mediate the teaching and learning processes and; 2) how it allows the teacher to promote language practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic that continues to affect teachers around the world.

In order to answer these questions, we reported two cases experienced in different language learning contexts, in which we found that in both studies, Zoom has contributed positively to mediate and enhance the teaching and learning of English considering different audiences, interests, and needs. Moreover, it was also identified that the speaking and writing

skills best performed when teaching through and using the platform's most functionalities and tools.

When considering Zoom as a teaching resource, it is important to understand that there is still room for improvement of its functionalities and the possibility to add new extensions and third-party software. Some difficulties with stability regarding students' connection became apparent, once some functionalities demanded a better internet connection. Besides, it is essential to understand how the technology works; it means to have digital fluency enough to properly explore the platform's potential. Despite minor technological difficulties found during both teachers' practical experiences, they managed to adapt and use the platform with proper digital fluency, exploring it for the benefit of students who were not prepared to have online classes or either willing to do so.

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