Technological resources in the language classroom: managing time, levels and students' autonomy[1]

Elisa Seerig[2]

Resumo

Esta narrativa pretende descrever ferramentas que estão sendo implementadas nas salas de aula de língua inglesa, com estudantes de Ensino Médio do Instituto Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (IFRS), Campus Bento Gonçalves – Brasil. Elas permitem aos professores um melhor gerenciamento do curto tempo que ficam com cada grupo de estudantes, bem como fornecem uma ampla variedade de possibilidades de exercícios a estudantes com diferentes níveis de conhecimento da língua estrangeira. As ferramentas apresentadas aqui podem também ser utilizadas como recursos mais eficientes de avaliação formal e informal, considerando que professores de línguas costumam ter um grande número de alunos. Alguns dados relacionados a uma pesquisa feita com estudantes, referente ao uso de tais ferramentas, também são mencionados. Esses recursos poupam tempo e proporcionam um espaço de aprendizagem mais envolvente, tornando os estudantes mais autônomos e colaborativos.

Palavras-chave: Inglês como segunda língua. Ensino Médio. Ferramentas digitais.

Abstract

This narrative intends to describe tools that are being implemented in English Language classrooms, with public high school students in the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Sul (IFRS), Campus Bento Gonçalves, in Brazil. They allow teachers to better manage their short time with each group of students, as well as provide a wider range of possibilities of exercises to students with different levels of knowledge of the foreign language. The tools presented here may also be of use for more efficient formal and informal assessment, considering that language teachers usually face a large number of students. Some data related to a survey carried out with students, regarding the use of such tools, are also mentioned. These resources save time and provide a more engaging learning environment, making students more autonomous and collaborative.

Keywords: English as a Second Language. High School. Technological Tools.

1 Introduction

Being a language teacher in regular public schools in Brazil is not easy. With only one 50-minute period a week (or two 50-minute periods, in very few institutions), it is hard to manage all the bureaucratic demands of the institution and, also, teach, *per se*. Studying a foreign language became mandatory from 6th grade (11-12 years old) only in 1996 (before

that, it was from 8th grade on). And, by studying only 50 minutes a week, in which we are supposed to take attendance, make students quiet and organized, and teach something that will be forgotten the week after, it became harder and harder to believe the system would develop a wider knowledge on the language. Because of that, students' parents enroll them in Language Courses to enhance their language abilities. Although this is a good thing, it usually turns into another problem in the school classroom, since there will be different levels of knowledge in the same space.

On top of that, we also face a small amount of time to effectively plan our classes, because most teachers work under a tight schedule and tend to even work in different schools throughout the day. If you work in schools with 50-minute classes per group of 25 five students, full time (forty hours a week) you'll have around 800 students! How can we deal with the demands of connecting with them, assessing them on a regular basis and help them develop the language at their own pace, if we can hardly learn all the names in a year?

There are, though, some programs carried out by the Brazilian Government, in partnership with other institutions, that intend to provide these teachers with some new resources in EFL, and one of them is PDPI (Brazil English Teachers Program -Programa de Desenvolvimento Profissional para Professores de Língua Inglesa nos EUA - PDPI[3]). I had the opportunity to go through all stages of the selection process and spent six weeks taking classes in the Michigan State University, through the English Language Center. With me, other 479 teachers from all states in Brazil went to different institutions of the USA.

In my return, I decided to practice what I had learnt addressing the main issues I faced in my teaching. I work in a full time Federal technological school (IFRS), and have two 50-min periods available to work with my students, per week. Each of my groups have around 30 students, which means I teach 180 students every week. Two of the six groups are 3rd graders, and the other four are 2nd graders. Which, regarding English Language, does not mean much, since there are fluent students among false beginners in each group. Besides the problem with assessing (and providing learning) to different levels, I also had

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[3]This program is a partnership among Brazil's Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), Fulbright Commission and IIE (Institute of International Education).

some issues with time management (I would spend a long time explaining activities), how to effectively use the resource book (provided by the government for free, but with lots of activities in English that some students have problems in understanding), and, also, classroom management in general (students finish activities in different paces and disturb others, students don't do their homework, students don't bring their materials...). It was also very hard for me to reach students with more difficulties, because they feel insecure among others who have a more developed level of language. By the end of each trimester, it was chaotic to assess all the exams and remember their level of collaboration" (in order to provide them with a grade for their development in class, too).

In order to solve these matters, a wide range of technological resources were implemented in my daily teaching practice - with which I became familiar with thanks to the course I took in USA. In the following lines, I will present the issues above mentioned and the solutions I had found through these tools[4]. I have also made a survey[5] with students regarding their opinion about the use of such tools (they have considered their use between March and June of the current year), and some of the relevant results will be briefly mentioned here.

## 2 Managing the classroom and the time

One of my first procedures was to determine the rules of our classes from the beginning. I handed students six main rules that should be followed and discussed the consequences of following them (or not). They all agreed to follow them and knew there would be some consequence if they didn't. However, how can we verify - and attribute a grade percentage (in my case, I always consider 15%)- to responsibility, participation or homework on a weekly basis?

I decided to test a tool called ClassDojo, with positive results for me and my students. First, I tested it by myself, using it to take attendance and see if I could use it regularly and

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[4]I will not describe each tool in detail, but only argue on what aspects make them useful for my routine. Most of them have a much wider range of uses, that can be explored by the reader on their own.
[5]The survey was made available through email to each student. Between June 1st and 9th, 115 students answered.

with ease (I recommend the same procedure to other teachers - we have to be very familiar with the tool before presenting it to students). It allows you to upload your groups in your cell phone by giving each of them a "dojo", or a monster for each student to pet. You attribute positive points to good work in class and make them negative in case they do something inappropriate. Thus, you can assess them every class in your device, and it saves information automatically. You can also choose to make it available for students and even parents - I was insecure about showing it to high school students as they could find in childish[6], but they loved to edit their dojos and post drawings on their walls. It is also good that you can write the positive and negative points in any language. In my case, I write them in English. In order to give them a sense of achievement as a group, I promised them a "special class" (with a TV program or special food) every time they reach 500 points as a whole class (it took me about one trimester).
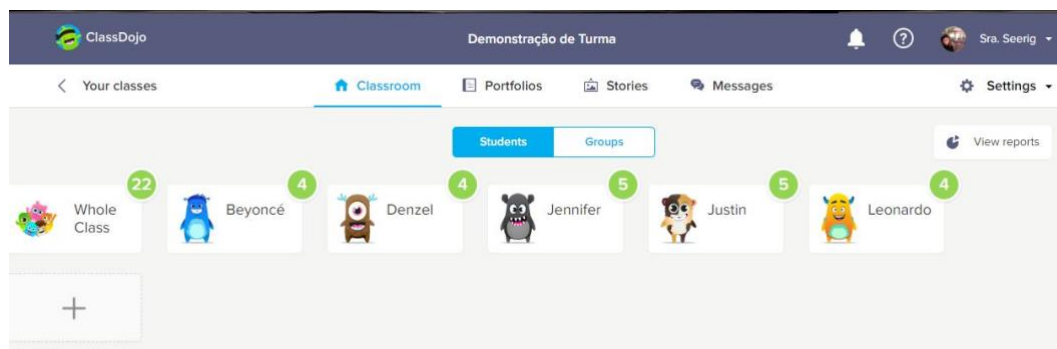
Picture 1: "Class demonstration" on ClassDojo.
Source: Author's ClassDojo account.

In order to manage time more adequately, I started putting a chronometer projected on the wall (you can also just determine a set time and count it on your watch or cell phone). They concentrate on the activity because they know that, meanwhile, I walk around the classroom checking it out (and giving them a negative point on ClassDojo with one click, in

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[6]Remember to analyse your students' profiles - most of my students are very collaborative and feel happy to see their good work being recognised. If you feel most students might react negatively (like some of my misbehaved ones did), you can just mention that you are assessing them class by class, indicating that they have points to get. By the end of term, you will have a fair way of verifying their collaboration and can argue through these notes if some of them "don't agree" - which used to be a problem for me, as well.

case they are off-task). For activities in the book that might go on too fast, I project them in slides on the wall, assessing their answers with gestures[7]. They show the "correct alternative" through a number or indicate if the sentence is true or false through miming a circle for true and a cross for false. This allows them to answer individually without the embarrassment of doing it wrong - for teachers, it's wonderful not to have all the yelling every time you ask a question to the whole group!

ClassDojo is considered a fair way of assessing their collaboration and participation by 79% of students who answered the survey. By analysing the profiles of students who *don't* consider it fair, it is visible that most of them are the ones who missed classes or do not collaborate much in class - without ClassDojo, these are the ones who benefit from teachers' "bad memory" when giving them the end-of-term grades. Only 54% said they would like other teachers to use the resource, something that demands further investigation.

3 Solving formal assessment issues with online tools

As mentioned before, one of our main problems is to effectively assess all students every end of term. As well as time consuming, correcting all activities by hand can be a waste of paper - at least, this is one of my major concerns. It is also difficult to identify a pattern of mistakes when you correct them one by one (especially when you try to check them all at once).

There are some tools that might help with that - these are all online, which requires a good internet connection and, preferably, an IT lab. One of the tools, called Kahoot!, might be familiar to some teachers already. It consists of a live quiz[8] in which they have a question projected on the board and select the correct alternative. It gives you feedback right after each question. Students get really satisfied when taking it, however, it might be not so fair to grade an activity that works with a chronometer for each question. I usually give them time

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[7]A very useful assessing technique that I have learnt with my MSU professor Amy Kroesche.
[8]Available at https://kahoot.com/. There are other ways of using it that are worth exploring, as presented to us by MSU professor Austin Kaufmann.

to review the content before taking the quiz. You can use it as a quick informal assessment tool.

Thus, another tool that is being very useful is called Quizizz[9]. It is very similar to Kahoot!, however, each student has the questions projected in their screen and take the quiz individually, as it is self-paced (you can also change this setting). While they take the test, the teacher's screen shows their progress and their accuracy - you know who has already finished and how well they did. By the end of the test, the tool provides you with the questions that most students answered wrong, and you can get a quick review right after. For quick students, they can even enter other games provided by the website itself.

Both Kahoot! and Quizizz allow you to search their content by keyword, which means you can copy quizziz and edit them if you like. Another interesting aspect is that you can give them as homework - students use a password and take the quiz at home; later, you see who has done it by checking the automatic list the tool generates. They generate a downloadable file with the answers of each student, and there is your formal assessment document!

Socrative[10] is a more formal tool that also allows you to assess students online by checking their pace through your own screen while they take it. It might be an equivalent to Google Forms on test mode, however, it generates individual pdf documents for each student's answers. You can also opt to use the written mode for the answer, in which case you read and grade each one separately. It also generates a table where you can find out which questions were more difficult to the group as a whole. The main difference from the others is that Socrative doesn't allow you to look in a "bank" of questions. In all of these tools you can also insert pictures.

Being asked if they missed written tests, only 11% argued they did, and 84% felt totally satisfied with the quality of assessment in Socrative. The percentage might indicate I should provide them with *some* paperwork (one student mentioned the need of taking notes - this can be solved by allowing draft paper during the test).

If you are able to develop speaking activities and want to assess it regarding their pronunciation and accuracy, you might face another challenge - how can we listen carefully

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[9]Available at: https://quizizz.com/
[10]Available at: https://www.socrative.com/

to each of them? If we do it in class, will the others be silent enough? Flipgrid[11] might be the tool for this case - of course, you'll need your students to have smartphones (with space in it) or a computer with a camera and a microphone. The free version allows you to have students uploading 1min30sec videos answering a question that you provide. In informal chats with the group I tested the tool with (and who were very unhappy to have themselves recorded at first), they reported they enjoyed to be able to see *themselves* speaking. The teacher can also leave notes - I could mention flaws in pronunciation, for instance.

## 4 Managing different levels in the same classroom

As it is already visible, I use several resources online - but not all the time. I usually prepare one or two classes to introduce a topic or an issue to students (using both the book and the slides). Which means I integrate classes in the traditional classroom and use the IT Lab to provide students with practice (related to grammar or vocabulary).

Reading articles in English can be one of those challenging moments where some students do it very quickly whereas others tend to take a long time analyzing the text word by word, never getting the idea. Lextutor can solve this problem by allowing you to upload the text in their system, for them to separate all words by level. Most texts provided by the books are online, so I usually search for them, upload them on Lextutor[12], get the words graded by level and deliver a sheet with them *before* the reading. This is useful because: you can argue with students that the text is not so difficult, since most of it is for readers of up to 1,000 words, and because they can look at the whole vocabulary before reading the text. I ask them to color the words they *know* in the list - I move around the class and can also verify how familiar they can be with the vocabulary, individually, by looking at the amount of color in their paper. For words they don't know, they can either look in a dictionary or online (usually, as homework). This has been helping them feel more secure when facing a long text.

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[11]Available at: https://flipgrid.com/ This tool was presented to us by MSU professor Alissa Cohen.
[12]This tool has been presented to us by MSU professor Amy Kroesche. Available at: https://www.lextutor.ca/

For the moments when we practice in the lab, one tool that has been a time saver is Padlet[13]. It allows you to upload all sorts of resources in one online page that looks like a website. It's possible to make it secret so that only the ones with the full link can access, and you can even make it interactive - students can post their papers there, for instance. Although our institution provides us with the use of Moodle, Padlet makes things easier because students are not required any login or password to access it. Editing the background and inserting fun titles (that are all editable) are some ways to make it a funnier platform to interact with students.
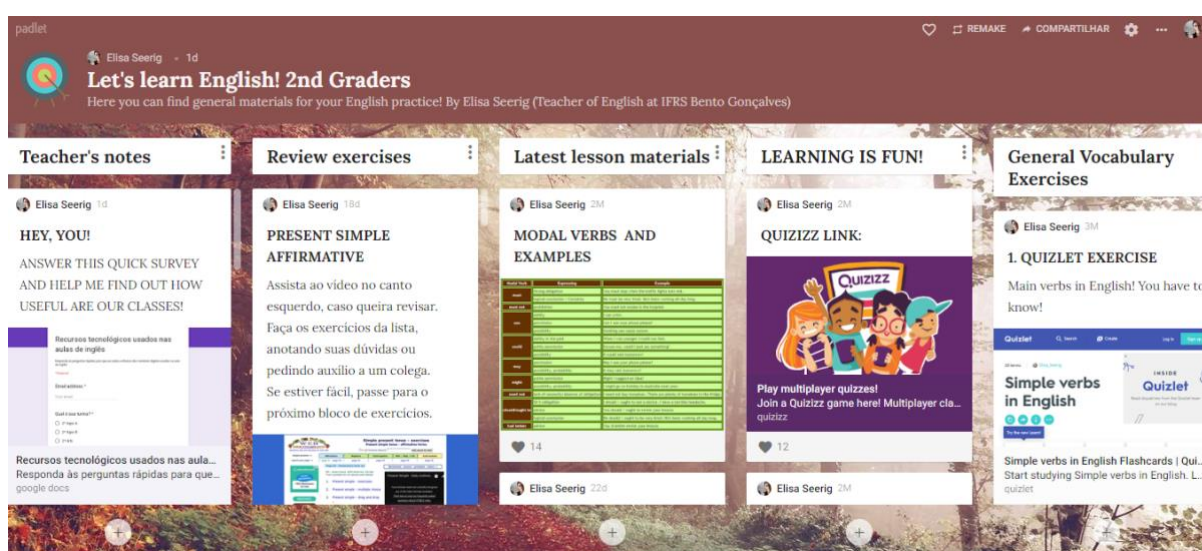

Picture 2: Padlet developed by the author in order to organize the activities for high school students.
Source: Author's Padlet account.

Since you can upload basically any link to anything you want them to look at, you can organize materials and online activities by level or by need. A study tool they use a lot and enjoy very much - and which has its links posted on Padlet regularly, for basically every topic we study - is called Quizlet[14]. This tool allows you to create (or copy and adapt from other

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[13]This tool has been presented to us by our MSU Content class professor Leah Addis. Available at: https://padlet.com/

[14]Available at: https://quizlet.com/ Quizlet, Quizizz and Socrative were tools presented to us by MSU professor Mary Lou Turnbull.

users' lists) online "cards" (you can make them translate a word or term, or you can make them complete gaps, etc. There are many possibilities if you are creative). The great advantage is that, with the same set of cards, you have lots of different activities that go from introduction to vocabulary to matching sets to games that demand speed to reach higher points and even automatic tests. This is a way of addressing students with various levels of knowledge on the set you are providing.
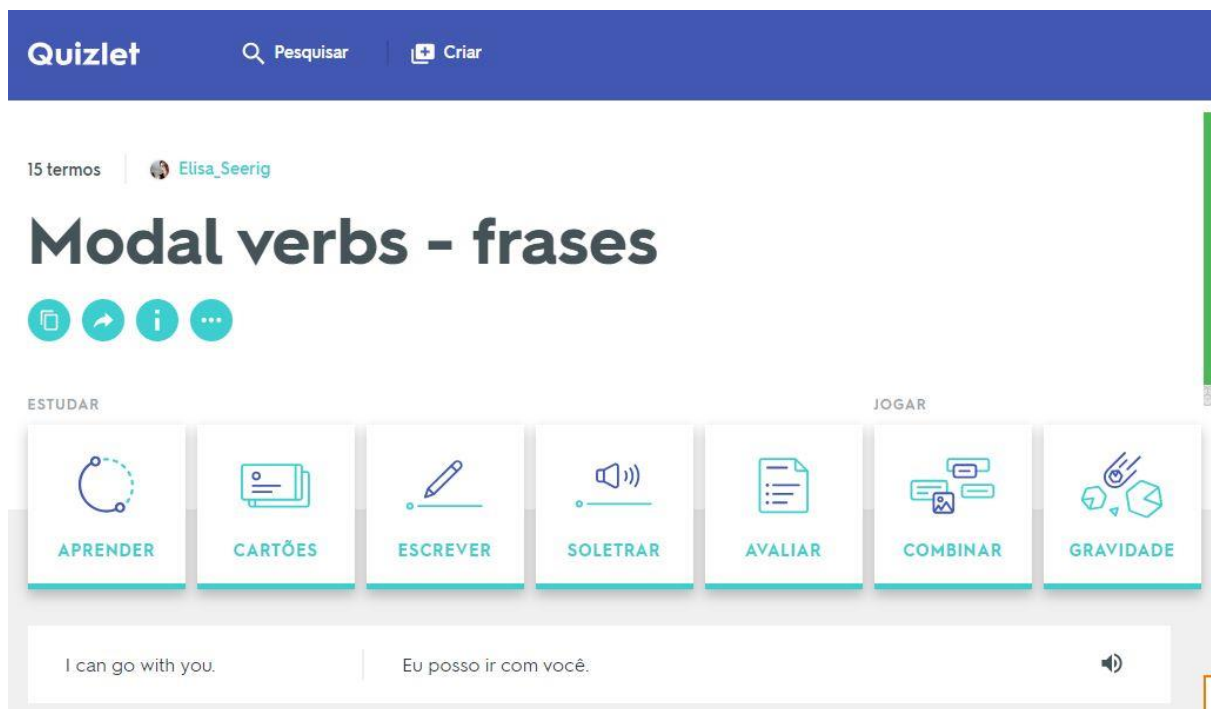
Picture 3: Quizlet set layout. There are seven different ways to play with the same set.
Source: Author's Quizlet account.

When students are too quick and think they know everything, I provide harder sets or even allow them to use another tool they love, called Lyrics Training. They can listen to songs (that I demand to be in English, but that are available in other languages, too). While they do the exercises in the computer, I move around and help them with any questions they might have. When we have tests, I select extra activities for them to review (if they need) It includes PDF exercises and other online activities (like those provided by agendaweb.org, or even Quizizz and Kahoot! in homework mode). Padlet can be accessed at home, too, which

allows them to study anywhere. Of course, I am always careful to make tests with activities that are similar to the ones they do in class.

5 Final Considerations

Online tools have been saving me a lot of time preparing activities and allowing me to be a more helpful teacher when they are actually focused on practice in the computer. It also allows students to become more autonomous and responsible[15] for their learning, as they have access to old activities any time they want by checking in our Padlet page. I also spend less time correcting exercises and effectively teaching what they need support with (through the results table generated by many of the tools presented here). As for students, 98% claimed they enjoy using digital tools in class and 84% would like other teachers to use them in class, too.

If it wasn't for this opportunity provided by the Brazilian Government and the course that was so well developed by the instructors in institution I stayed, I probably would never come across these resources. There are many other techniques I have implemented in my class due to the opportunity, but they will not be relevant here, since this is mainly about the use of technology. I also understand that these tools demand some resources that not all institutions might have access to. However, I believe the problems I listed are the same for most of us, language teachers, and I honestly hope that, in some level, the reader can test and implement some of these suggestions in class, achieving a more fulfilling time among students.

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[15]In my survey, 93% of students reported that they feel more autonomous to study at home thanks to our Padlet page.