

## Academic event report

### Discussing ELT with... Instagram livestream sessions as an opportunity to reflect in times of coronavirus

#### Introduction

Organised by the English Department of the Instituto de Profesorado Sedes Sapientiae, Gualeguaychú, Argentina, a series of 11 live sessions<sup>1</sup> were held on Instagram and YouTube from May 17 to June 27. The guests

were ELT specialists and technology experts Darío Banegas, Lucía Soriano @utopiaeducacion, Scott Thornbury, Alex Corbitt, Marc Prensky, David White, Penny Ur, Dolores Orta, Cristina Banfi, Judith Harris and Jeremy Harmer.

The initial objective was to reflect on the sudden virtualization of lessons due to the Social, Preventive and Mandatory Isolation and lockdown declared in Argentina in March this year. The number of followers who joined the series and its popularity made us think it is a cultural trend worth reflecting on, and an opportunity to make sense of what we are going through. From these dialogues, categories of analysis arose, especially related to bonding with students, with the need to revise our teaching practice, and with the relevance of content and assessment.

#### Teaching with technology

Both Corbitt and Harris said that before introducing technology in the classroom, we should ask ourselves whether using a tool helps students do or learn something they could not do before, or whether it helps them do it better. If there is no justification that the tool will make learning better or allow them to do something they could not do before, then it is not necessary to use that tool. They reminded us of the affordances and constraints of technology.



---

<sup>1</sup> A recording of each session is available at [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-FR\\_60r-kG84CLU08BVPKYfp6UqjYRNt](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-FR_60r-kG84CLU08BVPKYfp6UqjYRNt)

In a new culture where attitudes and beliefs have changed significantly, Prensky said that the adults of today are the last pre-internet generation. We are gradually becoming symbiotic with machines, which obviously affects language learning. Using translators or dictionaries are both different ways of using technology in relation to language. Children have a symbiotic relation with technology just like older generations had with books, i.e. the relationship with reading has been foundational for centuries in a way the relationship with technology is foundational nowadays.

Prensky also gave examples of using technology for language learning. He highlighted that the power of technology is to do things we could not do before, like communicating live with people in other parts of the world. He suggested that we can ask students to record a daily conversation and then learn to say it in English. Thus, they will be dealing with their own dialogues and not somebody else's, which is the case of most textbooks. Banegas, Corbitt and Orta also mentioned ways of making content and material more closely related to students' identity: restoring, remixing and such like.

The sudden move into online teaching has been a challenge to us all, since we had to go digital in this lockdown. "When you need it, you learn it. We are good at that as human beings", said White. Most teachers naturally transferred what they had been doing in the classroom into their Zoom lessons, according to Thornbury. This means a lot of synchronous face-to-face teaching, which can be really tiring for students as well as teachers. It is not necessary to spend a lot of time in front of a screen. It is not about repeating our classroom practices online but trying out new things. It is an opportunity to personalize teaching even more. We should use apps that foster communication and creativity and those that provide input, especially through reading and listening. To sum up, Thornbury said students need input, focus on meaning, interaction and feedback.

Asked whether Tik Tok can be a meaningful way of drilling, Thornbury said any app or tool that is widely popular with young learners is worth exploiting because they are already using it. Although Tik Tok is limited as regards how much language can be introduced, repetition in both listening and speaking is beneficial for learning: "Nobody is denying that repetition is necessary in language learning, perhaps not the mindless kind of one". He added that repeating exposes us to language and research is conclusive that receptive skills are necessary for learning. He also said that any task that involves scripting and rehearsing is useful.

### **The relevance of content**

All the experts agreed on the value of using content suitable for the students' needs. Besides, materials created by students, such as anecdotes, poems, stories or descriptions prove to be more motivating to them, as they deal with topics which interest them. When asked how to motivate students to read, Corbitt suggested teachers should curate good texts that might mirror students' identities and provide windows into others' experiences at the same time,

while involving students in creative writing. He mentioned “restoring” texts as a technique in which texts are rewritten from a different point of view. He mentioned an example when he was working in the Bronx and had his students rewrite Harry Potter as if it had taken place there as a way of bringing kids’ identities into the stories.

White highlighted the fact that there is not much point in remembering information nowadays, but rather in being able to do something with it, especially when learning languages. He also warned us that all written homework can be just a copy-and-paste exercise.

Banfi talked about the tension between coverage and depth when developing the contents included in the syllabus. The need to cover too much content in a superficial way encourages only memorisation. She suggested we focus on using language properly according to the context. It all starts with awareness: we need to teach students to be able to decode their environment, cautiously approach the situation, and manage it with the language they have learned.

### **Testing and assessment**

As regards assessment, the interviewees feel it should reflect the type of activities done in class and, in these particular times, it is preferable to give students brief meaningful activities and provide appropriate feedback. The use of mock tests and rubrics help teachers and students agree on assessment criteria and provide formative assessment at the same time. It is also important to give students the opportunity to rewrite or correct the assignment after getting feedback. Soriano said that “the idea of testing as a surprise is old school”. Ur recommended announcing tests in advance and saying what they will be like. She suggested using rehearsals or asking students to design tests as well. For fast finishers, she recommended adding optional exercises with a bonus.

Thornbury admitted that communicative testing is difficult and he used the analogy of having to assess runners. One way is to carry out a battery of tests to see which one is physically better and another one is to tell them “You see that tree over there? Well, ready, set, go” and then assess them accordingly. He referred to that as “performance testing”. Testing communication should be like that and simple rubrics can help tremendously. He said it is a lot easier to assess grammar activities but, in the end, communicative assessment is much more valid.

### **Bonding as a key factor**

Soriano encouraged us to see ourselves as listeners, not just speakers, and to take some minutes at the beginning of the lesson to ask students how they are feeling. White believes that online education can be more inclusive since mix-modes provide more opportunities to write questions and engage: “it’s less confrontational to ask a question in a digital environment than it is when you’re in a massive room face to face”. There are winners and

losers in this situation, he concluded. He encouraged us to decide what things we put back in and what things we can never go back to. When discussing the need to move online overnight, Harmer expressed that he was pleased to see that many teachers understood that it was all about empathy and caring: “reaching out really matters”.

### **Reflections and projections**

The experts agreed on the importance of letting students know the value of what they are learning and on the fact that this can motivate them. They also mentioned that technology is improving in such a way that it might soon take over many of the skills we teach in the classroom. Thus, we need to rethink what we teach. As for teaching online, they highlighted the importance of bonding and scaffolding. They acknowledged that it is not easy to go digital overnight. It is not about being a jack of all trades but rather specialising in one or two tools and making the most of them. Their final advice in these times of lockdown and sudden virtualization of lessons was to take it easy and bear in mind that we are doing our best.

Although lockdown has been a tough situation, we believe that it has meant an opportunity to reconsider some of the issues that already needed reconsidering and has given us a chance to reflect on what we gained and what we cannot go back to when we finally return to face to face education.

Carolina Clerici  
Instituto de Profesorado Sedes Sapientiae  
[clericicarolina@hotmail.com](mailto:clericicarolina@hotmail.com)

Cristian Dopazzo  
Instituto de Profesorado Sedes Sapientiae  
[cristian.dop@gmail.com](mailto:cristian.dop@gmail.com)