

Modern Languages during a pandemic: how instructional videos, Conti's MARSEARS framework and strong routines have enriched my practice

Sonja Fedrizzi

Broughton High School

Abstract: In this article I review how I adapted my teaching in response to the challenges we faced in modern languages due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the switch to blended learning. I introduce methods and digital tools that helped me engage with students remotely, but that will also be useful in the classroom. I also discuss how I have adapted Gianfranco Conti's EPI method for blended learning.

Keywords: Covid-19 Modern Languages teaching, blended learning, Modern Languages teaching during lockdown, EPI method, Gianfranco Conti method, hybrid learning, digital tools, MSClassNotebook

I am a Modern Languages teacher at Broughton High School. Since 2007 I have taught French, Spanish, German and EAL in Austria, Australia and now Scotland. My Twitter handle is @MissFedrizzi and I share ideas on my blog mflteacher.webnode.co.uk.

"We can't (and we shouldn't) go back to 'normal' school. Working digitally, with the resources to support this, has to be built into the way we teach and the way children learn for the future." (Scottish Government, 2021)

The last year has brought a huge change to the educational landscape. Overnight, teachers not only had to adapt to their new virtual, blended learning environments but also, once back in the face-to-face classroom, adjust their teaching to Covid-19 safety requirements. Despite the initial shock to the system of lockdown number one, I soon embraced our new virtual learning environment and realized that this period of change would give me an opportunity to progress my teaching and accelerate a long overdue transition to digital tools, which would now no longer be held back by tradition and by a lack of resources.

In this review, I would like to outline the three pillars upon which my teaching has been based over the last year: Firstly, how instructional videos have allowed me to overcome social distancing in the ML classroom and how they will remain a big part of my teaching following a return to 'normal'. Secondly, how I use Gianfranco Conti's EPI method in a 'blended' learning style to increase student engagement and improve learning outcomes. Thirdly, I would like to share how, in particular this year, strong routines have helped build relationships, regardless of whether students are in classroom or at home.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, I found myself in front of MS TEAMS wondering how to deliver class content in a way that students would still engage with despite us not being in the same room. My first breakthrough moment was the rollout of MS ClassNotebook in our school's Teams environment, something that seemed particularly challenging at first, not only to me but also to our students. Low digital literacy was certainly an issue that had to be addressed in order to get all of our students to a level where they could participate in online classes effectively. I knew that, in class, videos would often raise their interest, so I started posting videos of other people explaining the content I wanted them to explore. Engagement, however, remained low and some research on how universities increase engagement with so-called massive open online courses (MOOCs) revealed that for students it is crucial that their own teacher is featured in the video content. I then came across a webinar by the MFL pioneer Joe Dale, who was sharing tools on how to produce one's own videos. Despite my initial hesitation as to whether this would be the right moment for my very own Hollywood debut, I soon started creating "how-to" videos, using online recording software such as *Loom* or *Screencast-o-matic*. For example, I recorded a video on how to redraft Directed Writing tasks for Higher Spanish within ClassNotebook, providing a detailed step-by-step walkthrough. Within weeks of uploading these videos, I noticed a change in attitude while engagement improved significantly. More homework was submitted and what was submitted was of higher quality.

Including instructional videos in regular in-class lessons has a variety of benefits that will make them an integral part of my future model of blended learning. When students are on their own device, like a tablet in class, or in the computer room, instructional videos give them control over the pace of the information. They can pause, rewind and re-watch according to their own needs, and differentiation is taking place. The fact that not only students but also their parents and caregivers have access to these instructional videos can support learners better outside of school.

Upon returning to the real classroom, I initially thought I that I could go back to teaching the way I had before lockdown. However, I soon realised that the Covid safety requirements would make this impossible. Modelling sounds through a mask, for example, would quickly give me a hoarse throat. Even worse, students could not properly hear what I was saying, nor could they see the movements of my lips whilst enunciating sounds. I thought back to the instructional videos I had made during lockdown and developed plan B: I would record and show students short videos on modelling sounds to raise their awareness for particular sounds and sensitise them to common errors. The fact that students were already used to me giving them instructions through videos while learning remotely paid great dividends and the in-classroom sound modelling videos were received very well.

Modern Languages classrooms rely on collaborative learning and personal interactions that build relationships, which are a key element of successful teaching. Overcoming social distancing rules was therefore an important obstacle to tackle. Through the

generous sharing of information regarding digital tools by the “MFL Twitterati” — a UK wide language teacher community on Twitter, I was able to weave a variety of tools into Gianfranco Conti’s “extensive processing instruction” (EPI) method (Conti & Smith, 2019) upon which my lessons are based. The EPI method is a research-based approach that focuses on teaching “chunks” through sentence builders to model the target language. Students go through a rigorous processing phase before moving into target language production. Students therefore achieve fluency sooner than with traditional models, they experience greater self-efficacy and become more confident linguists.

Not every digital tool has been useful for reaching the individual milestones of the Conti MARS EARS framework (Conti, 2021). I must confess at this point that I have been guilty of being blindsided by flashy apps and websites that looked fun but had little to do with getting my students to their desired learning outcomes. To avoid going off-course, my mantra has been “tasks before apps” when choosing digital tools for both face-to-face and remote teaching.

For modelling and awareness raising, I have been using tools such as the *Flippity Manipulatives* combined with *Vocaroo* voice recordings to give students access to my voice (not that of a voice actor) in French and Spanish for word ordering activities. The well-known *Mentimeter* website has served me well for all stages of the MARS EARS process, starting with spotting grammatical or syntactical differences during the stage of awareness raising to narrow reading activities for the stage of receptive processing. When entering into the structured production phase, word clouds and narrow translation activities have regularly been part of my lessons. For grammar lessons, in which I mainly use sentence builders to explore the sound, spelling, individual syllables, word boundaries and lexical retrieval, *Mentimeter* has been useful to check my learners’ understanding anonymously.

Manipulative task combined with Vocaroo audio recording
S1 example

The screenshot shows a digital interface for a language activity. At the top, it says "Manipulative task combined with Vocaroo audio recording" and "S1 example". Below this is a grid of text boxes. The boxes contain the following text: "J'aime", "J'adore", "aller au parc", "chez mes grands-parents", "au centre-ville", "J'aime", "jouer au tennis", "jouer au foot", "avec mes amis", "aller au cinema", "faire du jogging", "avec mes parents", "pendant le week-end", "pendant les vacances", "Je n'aime pas", "Je déteste", and "à Edimbourg". A Vocaroo audio recording player is visible at the bottom left of the grid. Below the grid, the URL https://www.flippity.net/ma.php?k=1BY7M_vqYFlixwbyl4m4zjp_npQEn3i1UEqagUuSm1Hg is displayed.

Figure 1: Example of the usage of Flippity Manipulatives combined with Vocaroo audio recordings

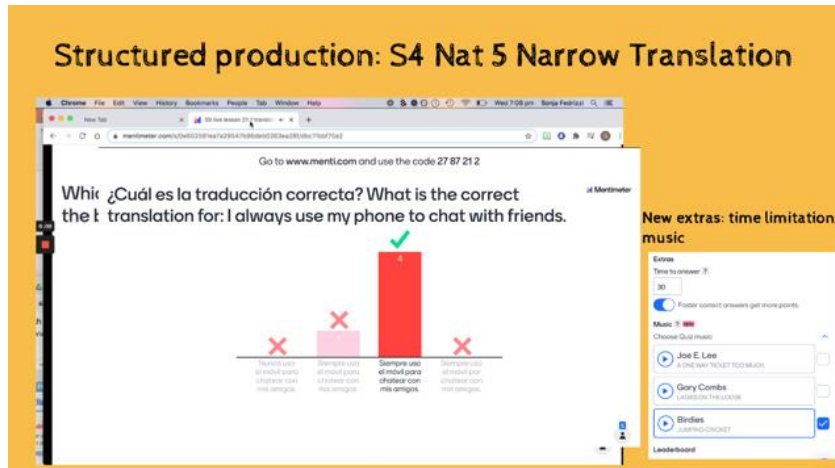


Figure 2: Example of the usage of Mentimeter with an S4 Spanish class

When entering into structured production, digital mini whiteboards, such as *whiteboard.fi* have been part of my remote and in-class lessons. They are extremely useful for most of the MARS EARS tasks as they increase engagement and generate positive learning experiences. This year, in particular, they were an excellent help for students to build camaraderie as we spent so much time apart. To instil a team spirit and give my students a sense of feeling connected, I have also used *Padlet* for collaborative tasks in the structure production phase. Both remotely and in class, my Higher and Nat 5 students have used it to write texts together, with me giving them instantaneous feedback. For any type of receptive processing activities, I have used *Wordwall*. This website has been a huge time saver because content can be recycled and used in different types of games once created. Overall, I have aimed to identify, and become proficient in, digital tools that not only integrate well into my blended learning approach but also seem likely to be useful back in the “normal” classroom beyond the pandemic.

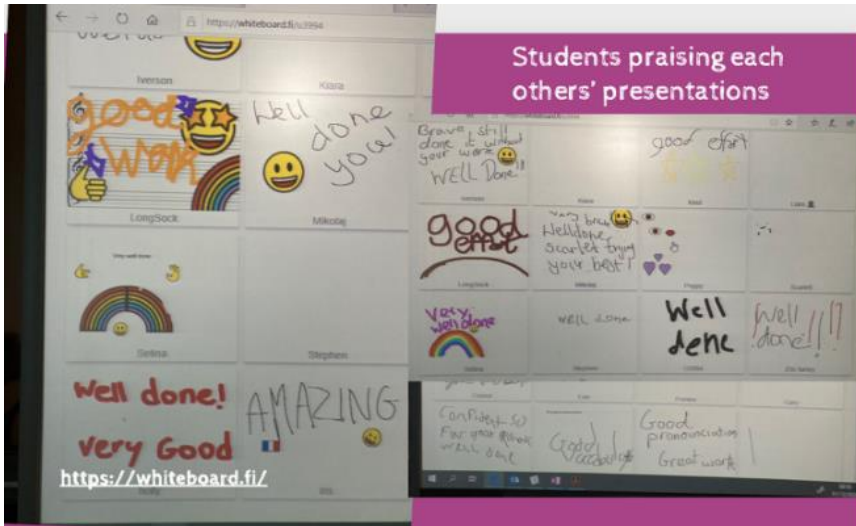


Figure 3: Example of the usage of [Miniwhiteboard.fi](https://whiteboard.fi/) with an S1 class praising each other's work

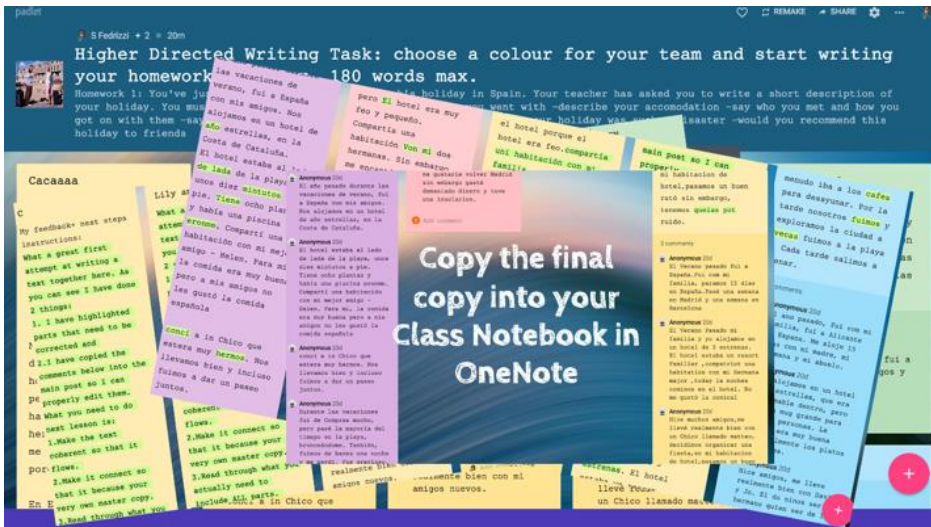


Figure 4: Example of the usage of Padlet for a Higher Spanish Class using collaboratively

Having covered video recordings and digital tools, I now would like to outline my third pillar of teaching, which is strong and consistent classroom routines. Undoubtedly, strong routines improve the “flow” and enable learners to be more focused and attentive during lessons. With the stop-start nature of the last school year, I have found it even more important to have a set routine to make up for lost time in class and remotely. At the beginning of each lesson I share my expectations and learning

intentions with my students. I have used a series of settling tasks, which have proven particularly useful during the chaotic climate of the past year due to Covid-19 safety regulations. Before the pandemic, I would usually only include content-related tasks, such as sentence builders on greetings or the current topic. This year, however, I included tasks with more personal questions, for example “Does wearing a mask at school bother you?” The purpose of this has been to give students a place to talk about all of these changes. Furthermore, due to social distancing rules in class, often there was no way for students to get to know all of their peers (other than those sitting right next to them). I wanted to give them an opportunity to just have a ‘natter’ and connect with each other. Apart from settling tasks, I use task sets which rotate every four weeks to minimise disruption, and students already know what I mean when I say “Let’s do a delayed diction”. Therefore, we do not lose precious class time, and behaviour management is easier as students know what they need to do. During live lessons, I made sure that students knew what our 30-minute sessions were about by displaying a holding screen (see image) which remains visible throughout the online lesson. Remotely, I used the TEAMS chat function for activities that would “normally” require students to put their hands up to answer questions. I noticed that the chat function helped students who might normally not have felt confident in an actual classroom to participate and volunteer their answers in a chat box.

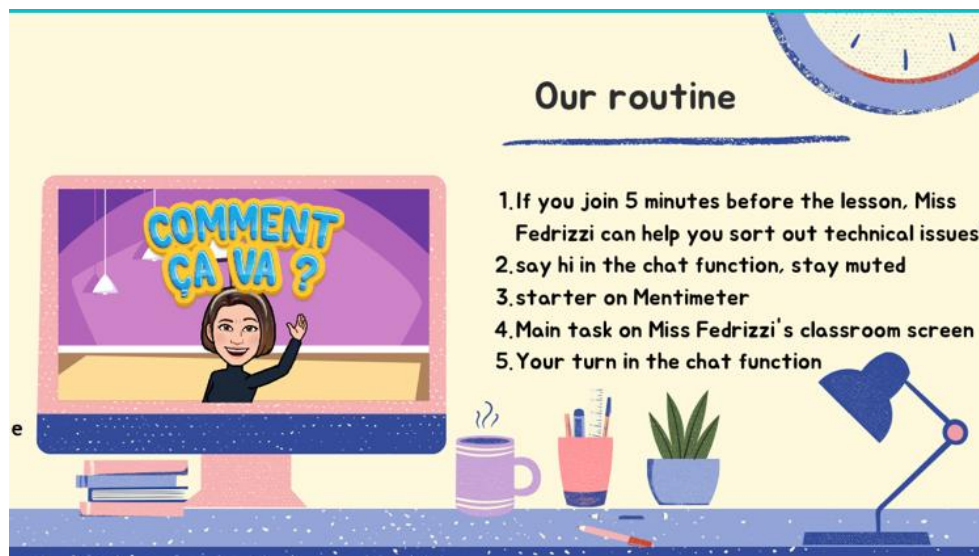


Figure 5: Example of “holding screen” during a live lesson in lockdown 2021

A new chapter emerged in education in 2020. Engaging and motivating students throughout lockdown and now in a blended learning environment has forever changed how we design and deliver classes. The next year will bring renewed uncertainty and surely many new challenges. We will have to assess how well students coped with phases of disruptions due to isolation and remote learning and we will have to make

sure to lend extra support to get everyone back to the same level. I am convinced that instructional videos, together with a few carefully selected, versatile and high-quality digital tools to support the EPI method and routines that allow students to connect with each other will help me address these challenges and, and that they will remain key elements of my ML teaching beyond the crisis.

Lastly, I wanted to express thanks to my colleagues at Broughton High School and the MFLtwitterati community for constantly giving me the opportunity to grow by sharing their best practice with me, be it through sharing meetings or social media. Without them, I would not be the teacher I am today. No teacher is an island. In order to thrive and create the best learning outcomes possible for our students in our specific settings, we need to rely on a community that nurtures and inspires us, that helps us grow by supporting us through our failures and that celebrates our success. I consider myself fortunate to be able to learn from educators who have generously been sharing their methods, resources and expertise through social media.

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