

Dialogic Pedagogy

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The Fluid Manual: A Polyphonic Alternative in Foreign Language Education



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Abstract

This empirical study explores a dialogic alternative to the conventional, fixed foreign language textbook by introducing the concept of a fluid manual—a pedagogical resource co-constructed dynamically through classroom interactions between teacher and adult learners. Grounded in Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism and heteroglossia, the fluid manual embraces the multiplicity of voices and meaning-making processes inherent in language use, positioning each lesson as a unique and collaborative event. Rejecting monologic, pre-determined content, this approach enables learners and teachers to shape the curriculum in real-time, using evolving questions, answers, and reflections as the core instructional material. Inspired by recent developments in digital collaborative logbooks, this intervention was implemented in two adult English language courses in Portugal, targeting absolute and advanced beginners. Through qualitative analysis of participant opinions and perceptions, the study reveals that the dialogic classes resulting in the fluid manual significantly enhanced learner motivation, autonomy, and engagement, while fostering a deeper connection to the learning process. Participants reported feeling more empowered and invested in their learning, attributing this to the co-authored nature of the content and the space for their voices to emerge and be transformed dialogically. The findings suggest that textbook-free teaching grounded in dialogism offers a viable and impactful alternative in language education, particularly for adult learners, by creating learning environments that are socially responsive, psychologically rich, and pedagogically inclusive. We do, however, acknowledge several constraints to the implementation of dialogism as a language teaching and learning approach, most of them related to the pre-established relationship between teacher and students in the conventional educational institutions and the objective oral expression limitations in the foreign language from the learners’ part. We conclude by affirming the educational potential of materials and methods that privilege interaction over transmission, and that recognize language learning as a fundamentally heteroglossic and co-authored process.

Keywords: dialogism, heteroglossia, textbook-free teaching, language education, adult learners.

Michele Broccia holds a PhD in Language Teaching – Multilingualism and Global Citizenship Education from Nova University Lisbon (2025). His dissertation, *Experimenting Alternative Language Teaching Approaches in the Classroom: The Fluid Approach*, proposes a textbook-free, dialogic method grounded in orality and disciplined improvisation. The present paper is based on this dissertation. He also holds a Master’s in Foreign Languages and Literatures from the University of Cagliari. From 1992 to 2011, he taught English in Italian middle schools, then lectured in Italian at the University of Iceland until 2015, and in Italian and Sardinian at the University of Lisbon from 2015 to 2020. His early research on Sardinian literature resulted in publications and public lectures in Reykjavik. His current work focuses on student-centred, innovative language teaching practices. He explores dialogism as a foundation for co-constructing meaning and enhancing communicative competence in the classroom.

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Introduction

In conventional foreign language education, the textbook typically serves as a stable and authoritative source of linguistic norms, predetermined content, and sequential grammar points. Such materials often reflect what Bakhtin (1981) identifies as a *monologic* orientation to meaning: a pedagogical logic grounded in transmitting finalized knowledge from teacher to learner. This monologic model positions the textbook as a single authoritative voice, leaving little room for the multiplicity of perspectives, lived experiences, and emergent communicative needs that characterize authentic language use. As noted by scholars such as Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) and Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane (2012), this dynamic can create forms of *alienated learning*, where students are expected to assimilate a predetermined toolkit of skills disconnected from their evolving goals and identities.

To move beyond this paradigm, we turn to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose conceptualization of language as fundamentally dialogic provides a powerful lens for rethinking pedagogical materials and practices. For Bakhtin (1981, 1986), every utterance arises within a chain of prior utterances and anticipates future responses; meaning-making is always socially, culturally, and ideologically situated. In this sense, classrooms can be envisioned as dialogic arenas in which voices—of teachers and learners alike—interact, negotiate, and reshape one another. Central to this view is the notion of *polyphony* (Bakhtin, 1984), the coexistence of multiple, autonomous voices within a shared communicative space. As dialogic education theorists note (Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, & Gradovski, 2019), polyphony stands in sharp contrast to mono-goal approaches in which teachers must guide learning toward fixed curricular endpoints defined unilaterally. Polyphonic classrooms, in contrast, require negotiation, flexibility, and mutual authorship.

Equally relevant is Bakhtin’s concept of *internally persuasive discourse* (IPD), which contrasts with externally authoritative discourse that demands acceptance by virtue of institutional or curricular status. IPD is discourse that individuals test, appropriate, and weave into their own meaning-making (Bakhtin, 1981). Building on Matusov and von Duyke’s (2010) interpretations, IPD can refer not only to individual appropriation or community membership, but also to shared dialogic construction of meaning. This third interpretation is especially pertinent here, as it underscores how teachers and learners co-construct understandings that reshape both the content of learning and their identities as participants (Uştuk & Yazan, 2024).

Another foundational Bakhtinian concept, *heteroglossia*, highlights the ideological, social, and contextual plurality inherent in any linguistic environment. Language learning classrooms are potentially heteroglossic: participants bring different linguistic repertoires, cultural histories, emotional orientations, and communicative intentions. Traditional textbooks, by contrast, tend to offer a standardized, sanitized version

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of language that suppresses this diversity. Saussure's distinction between *langue* (the language) and *parole* (the speech) helps illuminate this tension: the conventional textbook aligns with *langue*, an idealized, decontextualized system, whereas dialogically co-constructed pedagogical materials reflect *parole*, the situated and emergent expression of language in use (Joseph, 2022). Volosinov's (1973/1930) critique of Saussure further underscores that meaning is always socially and ideologically produced, not an abstract system to be transmitted wholesale.

Against this theoretical backdrop, we propose the concept of the *fluid manual*: a dynamic, co-authored pedagogical artifact created through ongoing classroom interaction. The fluid manual differs from a textbook in form, function, and epistemological orientation. It is not pre-written, externally authoritative, or fixed; rather, it emerges in real time as teachers and learners negotiate meaning, pose questions, request clarification, and respond to one another's contributions. In this sense, it seeks to capture the tensions and possibilities of Bakhtinian pedagogy by registering the continuous polyphonic interaction unfolding within the classroom. Discarding a pre-published textbook becomes the first step in moving away from monologic instruction and toward an educational environment where learners' voices, needs, and emerging meanings take center stage.

The fluid manual forms part of a broader pedagogical innovation—the *fluid approach* (Broccia, 2025)—which builds on traditions of textbook-free teaching such as Dogme ELT (Thornbury, 2005; Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) and collaborative digital logbooks (Dam, 2009), while grounding these practices more explicitly in Bakhtinian dialogism. In the fluid approach, lessons begin without predetermined content sequences. Instead, learner questions, doubts, and insights shape the unfolding of the lesson. These emergent contributions are documented in a shared online file, which becomes the evolving manual of the course. As such, the manual functions simultaneously as a pedagogical resource, a shared memory artifact, and a chronotopic record of the class, reflecting the collective journey as it unfolds through participants' situated perspectives and stances within the classroom chronotope (Matusov, 2015).

Building on this framework, the present study examines the implementation of dialogic education that enables the emergence of the fluid manual in two adult English courses in Portugal—one at A1 level and one at A2–B1 level. Our focus lies specifically on learners' perceptions of the manual as a pedagogical tool: how they experienced its flexibility, co-authored nature, and responsiveness; how they navigated the absence of a conventional textbook; and how they understood the manual's role in supporting their learning. While the design of the broader approach draws on earlier teaching experiences of the first author, this empirical study centers explicitly on evaluating the manual within the context of adult English language learning.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing literature on textbook-free language teaching and dialogic pedagogy. We then outline the methodological design of the study, grounded in action research, followed by a detailed description of the fluid approach and its operationalization. After presenting the participants and data collection methods, we describe the thematic analysis used to interpret learners' perceptions. We then present and discuss the findings, highlighting both the potentialities and limitations of implementing a polyphonic, co-constructed manual in a language classroom. The article concludes with potential directions for future research.

Textbook-free approaches to (language) teaching

The idea of a textbook-free, or textbook-limited, approach to teaching is not new. One example is the *disciplined improvisation* approach, conceived by Sawyer (2004), which captures the dynamic interplay between structure and spontaneity in teaching. In this approach, educators do not rely on rigid scripts but on adaptive expertise, making pedagogical decisions in response to students' emergent needs and

contributions. Such teaching values responsiveness, creativity, and co-construction—qualities difficult to achieve within the confines of a pre-packaged curriculum.

In the field of language education, textbook-free or textbook-limited approaches have gained particular traction as educators seek to foreground communication, interaction, and learner agency. Among these, the *Dogme* approach of English language teaching (Thornbury, 2006; Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) stands out for its radical rejection of materials-based instruction. Inspired by the minimalist *Dogme 95* filmmaking manifesto, this pedagogical movement argues for a return to the fundamentals of language teaching, namely conversation, emergent language, and authentic interaction (Thornbury, 2005). In a *Dogme* classroom, the content arises from the learners themselves—their experiences, interests, and linguistic gaps—rather than being dictated by predetermined units or grammatical sequences. The teacher facilitates rather than transmits, engaging with learners dialogically to negotiate meaning and build linguistic competence in context.

Such approaches position learners as co-authors of the learning process and challenge the dominant narrative of linguistic standardization characterizing majority languages, such as English. In doing so, textbook-free teaching approaches intend to reclaim space for human interaction, cultural relevance, and pedagogical autonomy. They open the classroom to spontaneity and meaning-making, resisting the instrumentalism that often accompanies textbook-driven instruction. In language education, especially, where communication is both the means and the goal, the absence of a fixed text can make space for genuine voice and authentic learning to emerge.

What is more, advancements in technology have introduced new perspectives on the concept of the textbook. Increasingly, the notion of open and adaptable digital textbooks is being explored as an alternative to traditional formats. Unlike conventional printed materials, digital coursebooks or *e-coursebooks* offer greater flexibility, allowing teachers and learners to modify, adapt, or replace content to better suit specific learning contexts (Cuttler, 2019). Despite their potential, many e-coursebooks remain largely digital replications of their print counterparts, maintaining a fixed, pre-defined structure. Nonetheless, their format enables the integration of various digital tools, such as annotation features and hyperlinks, which can enhance user interaction and engagement (Embong et al., 2012). Building on this foundation, more recent developments have given rise to collaborative digital textbooks (Grönlund et al., 2018). These function not only as repositories of content but also as interactive platforms that foster communication and cooperation between students and teachers. An example is the digital logbooks, which became popular in language teaching and learning (Dam, 2009). Functioning similarly to diaries, logbooks enable learners to document both classroom and extracurricular learning activities while engaging in reflective writing, contributing meaningfully to the development of independent and self-regulated learners (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011).

The present study combines a textbook-free approach with the collaborative digital logbook idea to propose the co-construction of a fluid manual using the Google Docs application during the class. The class starts without a concrete structure in mind, but with some draft ideas of content that needs to be taught according to the learners' language level expectations and their personal needs as expressed in the placement interviews (see below). As each lesson unfolds, the teacher is open to students' proposals, questions, and interventions. These will become part of the lesson, further developed, and inserted in a fluid digital book (a "live" Google Doc) where the participants will appear as protagonists-collaborators in its construction, with their names and contributions on. During the lessons, the teacher uses the Google Doc to write down the most important aspects dealt with, including both the exercises and activities created by the teacher to respond to the learners' needs or on-spot requests, and the students' responses and reactions to them. The file is projected onto the screen and used as a reference during and after the lesson. For its feature of being constructed following the flow of the lessons and for replacing the traditional paper

textbook, we call it a “fluid manual”. Figure 1 shows an example of a “timeshot” of fluid manual co-construction.

Figure 1.

Example of a “Timeshot” of Fluid manual Co-Construction

There is vs there are (há)
There are five people= Há cinco pessoas
There is a dog!

Teacher: How many students are there in the classroom today?
Anita: There are five students
Teacher: How many teachers are there in the classroom?
Taissa: There are two teachers
Teacher: What do you do? I'm a teacher!
Apunda: I'm a student!

Indefinite articles (um, uma) in English: **a** and **an**. See, in the examples below, how they are used.

Teacher: Raissa, are you a student, too?
Raissa: Yes, I am a student too!
Teacher: What is your job?
Paloma: I am a student too!
Celsa: I'm an accountant
Taissa: I'm a lawyer!
Anita: I am a teacher!

I have (got) a diploma in accountancy
I have got a dog
I have an orange
I am an artist

Teacher: Raissa, podes dizer a regra? (Raissa, can you say the rule?)

This innovative approach completely aligns with adult education contexts. According to an andragogical approach to teaching (Knowles, 1977), four types of syllabi can be identified: the syllabus as a contract, the syllabus as a power instrument, the syllabus as communication, and the syllabus as collaboration (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). The first two types are the most common. They conceptualize

the student as a passive object to be manipulated, with classroom events controlled exclusively by the instructor. In these cases, the syllabus operates as a rigid, non-negotiable structure, reinforcing an instructor-centered approach and serving as a mechanism of power (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). This creates a metaphorical wall between the teacher and learners. The syllabus as communication refers to the process of conveying its content to students. Here, the syllabus enables the instructor to provide key information prior to the course's commencement (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). However, this approach retains a predominantly one-directional dynamic (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). In contrast, the syllabus as collaboration involves students actively engaging with and contributing to the proposed syllabus. According to Fornaciari and Lund Dean (2014), this represents one of the most promising developments in andragogy, reflecting a shift towards learner-centred syllabi (Weimer, 2010). The fluid manual method we propose represents a unique — to our knowledge—example of a syllabus-as-collaboration approach.

Method

The study was grounded in an Action Research (AR) methodological framework, an approach that has become prominent in language-education research due to its capacity to bridge pedagogical innovation with systematic inquiry (Burns, 2010). AR is particularly suitable for investigations in which teachers seek to understand and improve their own practice through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Its dual aim—to generate actionable change while producing context-sensitive knowledge—aligned closely with the goals of this study, which examined the pedagogical potential of a dialogically co-constructed fluid manual as an alternative to the traditional language textbook.

AR was selected because it enabled the first author, as a teacher-researcher, to investigate a pedagogical problem that emerged directly from professional experience: the limitations of textbook-based teaching for adult language learners and the need for more dialogic, responsive, and participatory forms of instruction. As Burns (2010) notes, AR is a valuable means of gaining “a deeper understanding of one’s teaching, classroom, and students,” and it allows educators to discover “what works well in their teaching” by examining particular issues arising in their own classrooms.

This orientation resonated with the study’s purposes. Prior experiences teaching Sardinian—a minority language with no institutionalized materials—had revealed the transformative potential of dialogic, material-free pedagogy. These insights generated the initial problem statement: *Can a textbook-free approach, informed by dialogism and co-construction, support adult learners of English in meaningful ways?* AR provided the methodological framework necessary to investigate this question systematically and academically rigorously.

Central to AR is its cyclical paradigm, whereby emergent findings inform ongoing pedagogical action. Classical models, such as Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) four-step cycle (plan, act, observe, reflect), emphasize that inquiry is never linear; instead, processes overlap, repeat, and evolve as teachers modify their interventions in response to classroom realities. This study embraced this generative cyclicity.

- Planning involved identifying the core problem (the constraints of textbook-driven instruction) and designing two English courses structured around the fluid manual.
- Action included implementing the textbook-free approach, co-constructing the manual in real time with adult learners, and adjusting lesson flows based on emerging student needs.
- Observation comprised collecting multiple forms of data—lesson recordings, field notes, interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires.

- Reflection occurred continuously, informing adjustments to the manual, the lesson formats, and the broader pedagogical logic.

While the Kemmis–McTaggart model provides a useful starting point, it did not fully capture the complexity of the study. For instance, some data collection occurred before formal action took place (e.g., demographic questionnaires and placement interviews). The study, therefore, aligns more closely with Nunan's (1992) triadic structure—(1) a research question, (2) systematic data collection, and (3) data analysis and interpretation—while still retaining the cyclical spirit of AR. Importantly, the iterative process had tangible pedagogical consequences. As learner feedback accumulated, the teacher-researcher integrated modifications, such as adding an index to the fluid manual to address learners' desire for greater structure. This responsiveness exemplifies the developmental logic of AR, wherein teaching is simultaneously object and outcome of inquiry.

Research goal and question

This study aims to examine learners' perceptions of the fluid manual as a co-constructed pedagogical alternative to traditional foreign language textbooks, with particular attention to how this dialogic resource impacts adult learners' motivation, engagement, and sense of ownership in the learning process. Specifically, we address the following research question: How do adult English language learners perceive and experience the fluid manual as a learning resource compared to traditional textbooks?

Participants

The study participants were English language learners, voluntarily recruited through: (a) physical advertisement, positioned at different universities and faculties in Lisbon, Portugal, namely the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Universidade Nova (NOVA FCSH), the University of Lisbon, and the Instituto Superior Técnico; and (b) an email sent to all students enrolled in different courses of NOVA FCSH, the authors' host institution. The prospective participants had to contact the first author, who invited them to fill in an enrolment-demographic form (including their names, age, country of origin, qualifications, and English language level). Prospective participants were also asked to fill in and sign an informed consent on their participation in the research, through which they allowed the teacher to record the lessons. The document also informed participants about the activities involved in the project, such as following the lessons, participating in an interview and a Focus Group Discussion (see Data Collection Methods), and completing an online questionnaire. After receiving their registration form and informed consent, they were invited to an interview with the first author to assess their English proficiency using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The aim was to organize courses where participants had a homogeneous level of English. Potential participants could have been moved from one level to another, if necessary, but only during the first lessons.

Placement interviews were recorded. The author took notes about participants' difficulties and learning needs. Participants' most common mistakes, their needs and other feedback were used as a guideline for the courses' initial preparation.

The A1 course was attended initially by 17 students, of whom ten (eight women, two men) followed the course till the end. The A2-B1 course was initially followed by 18 students, of whom eleven (nine women, two men) followed the course till the end. Participants were all adults, ranging between 21 and 57 years old, with the majority concentrated between 26 and 36. Most of the participants were university students with a bachelor's or a master's degree. Their fields of study included Psychology, Law, Economics, Engineering, Music, Mathematics, and Philosophy. They came from different countries, among which were Portugal, Brazil, Angola, Cabo Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Chile. Since participants were full-time students or workers, attendance was not easy, even though they always showed high motivation. When

students were absent, they could follow the fluid manual available online, check what the lesson was about, and do the assigned exercises. Both courses lasted 20 hours and had an approximate duration of one month each.

The fluid approach principles and their operationalization

The fluid approach of teaching languages, part of which is the fluid manual, was conceived as part of a pedagogical innovation described in detail in Broccia (2025). Here, we will limit ourselves to presenting its basic principles and how they were operationalized both in classroom interaction and as part of the co-constructed manual.

The first principle guiding the approach is dialogism. Although the approach shares features with Dogme ELT (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009)—such as an emphasis on conversation and the rejection of scripted curricula—the fluid approach treats conversation as a product of dialogism, rooted in a genuine desire to engage with the individuals behind the learners. In instrumental dialogic learning, often present in other textbook-limited approaches, dialogue is employed by teachers primarily to enhance test performance and learning outcomes (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014). However, when instructional goals are predetermined by the curriculum, they represent what Matusov and Miyazaki (2014) term “non-dialogical educational means” (p. 2). In contrast, ontological approaches to education view both meaning-making and the learner’s humanity as inherently dialogic processes. As Bakhtin (1999, cited in Matusov, 2011) observed, a relationship becomes monological when one consciousness treats another merely as an instrument; it becomes dialogical when both are engaged as equal subjects. The fluid approach acknowledges the influence of instrumental dialogism—most notably the asymmetrical, pre-established teacher-student relationship (Skidmore, 2000)—but seeks to preserve dialogicity within existing structural constraints, discussed later in detail. The excerpt presented in Table 1 below shows the direction of the lesson shifts, as students express curiosity about the teacher’s life. Initially, the teacher sets up a pair work activity, but a spontaneous question from a student (Afonso, line 2) diverts the focus. The teacher recognizes this shift (line 19) and allows the conversation not only to follow its dialogic path but to actually form the lesson’s main activity. The exchange becomes a shared ontological experience, with life stories emerging naturally through the use of the foreign language. However, as discussed in detail in the Discussion section, the story-sharing part was dominated by the teacher, as the only linguistically competent partner in the dialogic interaction, with students’ participation being limited to asking questions.

Table 1²

Interaction Excerpt from the Last Lesson of the Course A2/B1

1	Teacher	Gonna! Yes! That's right! Very good! You're, you're good students! You know a lot! (Laughs) You know a lot!!! So, the-now the conversation is asking questions about the past. Ok? This is more difficult! Because you need, you need to remember the irregular forms, ok? lih! So, ahh, you can write some of – Have you already done -You haven't done - have you already done this activity? You have written! You have done a written activity but not talked! You didn't, ok? So, the situation is this: you're, hmm, at a job interview! Ok? Job interview and, hmm, and one of you is the job interviewer! You, you write some dates! Work experience, for instance! Some dates, important dates and what you have done in your work experience! And the job interviewer is asking you questions about that job or your actual position! So! Two dates! Ok? Write two dates! One, a previous job that you have finished in the past! Ok? And the other referring to the actual position! Ok? So that you can use the present perfect! The first activity, for instance, in my case, iih, I could write, from... Work experience, for instance! (The teacher starts writing on
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² Note: Sentences in Portuguese were translated into English by the first author, and places within asterisks *...* in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4.

		the screen while speaking) <i>WORK EXPERIENCE</i> Work experience! ok? It's like a CV! Ok? Like a CV! Ehm Two thousand eleven, 2011 two thousand fifteen, 2015 hmm, <i>LECTURER OF ITALIAN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND</i> lecturer, lecturer, hmm enlarge it! Lecturer at the University, at the university of Iceland! Ok? (unclear) ok? Ahm! I'm going to write three dates! Ok! Ehm! 2015-2020 <i>LECTURER OF ITALIAN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LISBON</i> I waste, I waste a lot of time with this keyboard! Italiana? Ahahaha! Lecturer at the University of Lisbon! OK? 2020 <i>UP TO TODAY PHD STUDENT AT NOVA UNIVERSITY</i> Twenty-twenty up to today PhD student at Nova University! Ok? Something like this! Very Briefly!
2	Afonso	Did you live in Iceland?
3	Teacher	Yes! I did!
4	Afonso	It's cool!
5	Teacher	How long did I live in Iceland?
6	Afonso	You have lived in Iceland for...
7	Teacher	Snap, snap! (Snapping is used by the teacher to indicate the utterance has to be improved). How long did I live in Iceland? [...] You can reply!
8	Afonso	You lived in Iceland for four years!
9	Teacher	Yes! Four years! I lived in Iceland four years! From two thousand eleven to two thousand and fifteen!
10	Afonso	Can you speak something in Iceland language?
11	Teacher	Yes, I can! Ég get, ég get talað íslensku! <i>*I can, I can speak Icelandic!*</i>
12	Mara	But not now, ahaha!
13	Afonso	Sorry?
14	Teacher	Ég get talað íslensku! (Speaking Icelandic) <i>*I can speak Icelandic!*</i>
15	Afonso	I don't understand!
16	Teacher	Þegar ég var á Íslandi talaði ég íslensku! <i>*When I was in Iceland I spoke Icelandic!*</i>
17	Afonso	Ok! I can't understand!
18	Natasha	Did you like in this country!? Ahahaha!
19	Teacher	We can! Ok! We can finish our lessons with this conversation!
20	Afonso	Ahahaha!
21	Natasha	Yes, with this conversation new! (Laughs) With questions!
22	Teacher	Yes! Questions! Ok! You ask me questions!
23	Natasha	Yea! Did you like Iceland?
24	Teacher	Yes! I liked Iceland very much! Yes, I still have a lot of friends and I'm planning, I'm planning to go there soon! Yes! [...]
25	Mara	For holidays!
26	Teacher	No! Well! In the last years I have always liked to mix my job with holidays because I like my job so much that my job is like being in a, on a holiday!
27	Mara	Holiday! On a holiday!
28	Teacher	Yes! That's right!
29	Mara	On a holiday! On a holiday!

30	Teacher	On a holiday! Yes! To be on holiday!
31	Natasha	Why you left from Iceland?

Fundamentally grounded in humanistic principles, the fluid approach regards learners as whole persons rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Dialogue, in this context, becomes ontological, allowing the participants' meaning-making within the specific context of the class (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012). Unlike alienated learning—which is imposed, disconnected from learners' interests, and driven by externally mandated instruction—the fluid approach fosters educational experiences that engage the learner holistically. The teacher's role shifts from that of a knowledge-transmitter to a facilitator, recognizing the learning process as a meaningful, transformative event in the student's life (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014). In such classrooms, students bring their emotions, experiences, and identities into the learning process, erasing the divide between life and education. As a result, during the lessons, there were several moments in which students' voices redirected or reframed the flow of the session, leading to the emergence of unanticipated meaning, as expressed by individual learners. The interaction excerpt presented in Table 2 exemplifies a polyphonic dialogic event, in which the teacher—by sustaining a dialogic posture—creates a learning environment where multiple viewpoints can coexist and where he himself engages in the co-construction of meaning, uncovering the latent potential within each learner (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014). While the lesson was underway, Denisa expressed a personal doubt (line 1) which, although framed as a grammatical issue, had strong ontological implications, as it related to her ability to understand and make meaning (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014). Her intervention triggered a collective response involving several participants (Aisha – line 4; Viviana – line 26; Naísa – line 28; Mara – line 30; Natasha – line 32; Cristina – line 33), producing a coral pursuit of understanding. In this excerpt, it is also interesting to observe how authoritative discourse, represented by the teacher³, gradually becomes an internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1981) among the learners. The teacher's dialogic stance assists in this process, as he does not urge to correct the students' errors, but he acknowledges their errors as interesting efforts (lines 21, 23, 27) in their meaning making process.

Table 2

Interaction Excerpt from the Sixth Lesson of Course A2/B1

1	Denisa	Mas eu tenho uma pergunta! <i>*But I have a question!*</i>
2	Teacher	Sim! <i>*Yes! *</i>
3	Denisa	Eu coloquei "He didn't understand.", mas eu queria saber, porque eu coloquei em parenteses, se podia ser "He don't understood.", ou não? <i>*I wrote "He didn't understand."; but I would like to know, since I placed it in parentheses, if it could be "He don't understood."; or not?*</i>
4	Aisha	Eu pus depois "understood" entre parenteses! <i>*I put "understood" after, within parentheses.*</i>
5	Denisa	Se poderia ser! Eu coloquei esta observação. Se poderia ser também assim! <i>*If it could be! I inserted this observation. If it could be also like that.*</i>
6	Aisha	Pois! Eu também coloquei! <i>*Yes! I inserted it as well!*</i>
7	Denisa	É o que você [...] <i>*It's what you [...]*</i>
8	Aisha	Understood!

³ We would like to note here that the teacher's authoritative discourse does not rely on his pre-defined authority, which would go against dialogic teaching standards, but on the foreign language spoken by the teacher. In Bakhtin's (1981) words: "Often the authoritative word is in fact a word spoken by another in a foreign language" (p. 343).

9	Teacher	Então, podes repetir a frase que tu escreveste? <i>*So, can you repeat the sentence that you wrote?*</i> What did you write?
10	Denisa	I write " He didn't understand" but é [...]
11	Teacher	Não é "I write"! <i>*It's not "I write"!*</i> No "I write"!
12	Denisa	I wrote, I wrote!
13	Teacher	I wrote, ok?
14	Denisa	He didn't understand but aah, aah, below I wrote "He don't understood" cause I, I wanted to ask, asking!
15	Teacher	Ok! Ok! It is in the focus! On the second sentence! He?
16	Denisa	Don't.
17	Teacher	No, no! What he did! Say it again!
18	Denisa	He don't.
19	Teacher	No, he don't! Ok!
20	Denisa	Understood!
21	Teacher	"He don't understood!" Very interesting!
22	Denisa	He not understood!
23	Teacher	Very interesting!
24	Aisha	Ou he didn't! <i>*Or he didn't!*</i>
25	Denisa	Mas acho o "don't" não combinava assim, então eu coloquei poderia ser "not understood"! Não sei! Ou não existe de todo? <i>*But I think "don't" didn't match like that, therefore I inserted it could be "not understood"! I don't know! Or doesn't it exist at all?*</i>
26	Viviana	He didn't!
27	Teacher	É muito interessante! Muito interessante, porque as dúvidas que vocês tem são, são curiosas! <i>*It's very interesting! It's very interesting, because the doubts that you have are, are curious! *</i>
28	Naísa	Humf, humf!
29	Teacher	Estás, eu estou a tentar, não podes misturar! <i>* You are, I'm trying – You can't mix things.*</i> You can't mix past with present! So, let's, let's analyse this sentence! "Don't" is completely wrong! First of all, why is it wrong?
30	Mara	He doesn't!
31	Teacher	Because it's [...]
32	Natasha	He don't.
33	Cristina	"Do" is the present!
34	Naísa	Because o verbo [...]
35	Teacher	It's not past! One! Second?
36	Naísa	O verbo não muda na interrogativa e nem na negativa! <i>*The verb doesn't change in the interrogative and nor in the negative! *</i>
37	Natasha	And don't and doesn't!
38	Teacher	One at a time! Natasha!
39	Natasha	My opinion is "don't" it's not for this subject!

40	Mara	Subject.
41	Teacher	Yes, yes, so!
42	Mara	He does!
43	Natasha	He does!
44	Teacher	Yes! Two mistakes! First, if you want to talk about the past, “don’t” is not for the past! It’s not the past simple!
45	Denisa	Poderia ser “does”! <i>*It could be “does”! *</i>
46	Teacher	Secondly, we have “he” and we can’t use “don’t”. Doesn’t, so two mistakes! Ok?
47	Aisha	He didn’t.
48	Teacher	Second!
49	Denisa	Mas então é [...] <i>*But then it’s [...]*</i>
50	Teacher	You’re using, you’re using a wrong auxiliary together with the past simple! Ok?
51	Denisa	Ok!

The third principle of the fluid approach is disciplined improvisation. Topics emerge dialogically from learners’ utterances—both spoken and written—and are shaped by real-time, contextualized classroom interactions. Rather than being imposed, the curriculum arises organically from participants’ lived concerns—their “mundane noise” (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014)—including personal narratives, feelings, motivations, and values. Certainly, there are some pre-established learning contents implied by each course’s corresponding language level, but how and when these contents will be taught largely depends on learners’ questions, inquiries, and worries. Since the beginning of each course, the teacher had prepared some materials and thematic units according to the learners’ needs as expressed in the placement interviews. Later, as the lessons unfolded, the teacher responded to each learner’s questions in a way that made the emerging content and answers relevant to the majority of the class. The teacher’s approach accommodated questions that seemed irrelevant from a conventional teaching perspective, acknowledging that, in dialogic teaching, such questions foster curiosity about the interlocutor and create unanticipated opportunities for discovery, while also revealing the nature and origins of learners’ difficulties. While the course was designed for participants with roughly similar language proficiency, the flexible curriculum enabled the teacher to respond to inquiries and engage with topics at a more advanced level when appropriate.

Subsequently, the fluid manual was shaped by students’ dialogic engagement, particularly through their spontaneous questions or requests for clarification. For example, in the fourth lesson of A2/B1 course, Afonso expressed a desire to work on possessive pronouns. The teacher responded by creating an impromptu communicative activity (Table 3), which was then also included in the fluid manual (see Figure 2).

Table 3

Interaction Excerpt from the Fourth Lesson of Course A2/B1

1	Teacher	Before going ahead, before going ahead with the lesson iih, Afonso asked me to talk about possessive adjectives, não? Yes?
2	Afonso	Pronouns!

3	Teacher	Pronouns, ok, ok! Iih! Then we have to think of another activity! I thought it was a - but let's see this very short activity to see the, both, both, possessive, possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns, ok? So, I would like you to, to, to stay close to each other, to stay close. For instance, there are six students, ok? There are six students and uhm yes, you can, Hadassa! Can you work together? ok?
4	Tiago	ok!
5	Teacher	And with Natasha, you can come here! ok? iih and we are talking about - so let's talk about your names and surnames, ok? Ehm! What's your surname?
6	Hadassa	My surname Jorge.
7	Teacher	Jorge! Ok! I said what's your surname? "My surname is Jorge". Ok? What's YOUR surname? Your is in this case an adjective or a pronoun?
8	Hadassa	a pronoun!
9	Teacher	Can you write what I'm saying on the screen?
10	Afonso	Yes, yes!
11	Teacher	Because we - I said what's your surname? My surname is Jorge! And then I ask you: What's YOURS? What's YOURS? Ok? Instead of repeating: What's yours?
12	Tiago	What's yours?
13	Teacher	Yes! What's yours? Iih! Can you enlarge a little bit? (Afonso is writing on the googledoc)
14	Afonso	Sure!
15	Teacher	I can't see! Moana, can you see? Can you read?
16	Moana	Yes, but it's, it's small!
17	Teacher	It's too small! Ok?
18	Moana	Too small!
19	Teacher	Too! Too quer dizer demasiado! Quando vamos colocar antes dum adjetivo! E quando vamos colocar no final duma frase? <i>*Too means 'demasiado'. When we put it in front of an adjective. And when we put it at the end of a phrase?*</i>
20	Tiago	Quer dizer <i>It means</i>
21	Teacher	I'm - I'm Portuguese too, I'm Portuguese too!
22	Tiago	Também.
23	Teacher	Ok! Can you see now, Bento? Can you see?
24	Bento	Yes
25	Teacher	Ok! Ahm! Can you separate what and name? Ok! Ok! Write: The teacher asks: what's your surname? Hadassa: my surname is Jorge! Then again, again: Teacher: What's yours?
26	Tiago	Nogueira!
29	Teacher	Nogueira! My surname, my surname is Nogueira! Full stop! Full stop! Ok? Full stop! What's the portuguese for "full stop"?
30	Naísa	Ponto paragrafo
31	Teacher	Ponto! What did you say?
32	Naísa	Ponto paragrafo!
36	Teacher	Mine is, mine is, mine is Nogueira! Ok? Ok! Then I ask you, I ask you, Afonso! Ok? Iih My surname, my surname is Bernardo, ok? My surname is Bernardo! My surname is Bernardo and then WHAT'S HIS? What's his? WHAT'S HIS?
37	Naísa	With H

38	Teacher	Yes, with H. What's his! Aitch, I, S. Aitch, agà, aitch, uhm?
39	Afonso	What's, what's his?
40	Teacher	What's his?
41	Afonso	My surname?
42	Teacher	No, What's his? I'm asking you: what's his?
43	Afonso	Aah! He's Nogueira!
44	Teacher	lih Let's see! What's! Write What's! What and apostrophe! What's HIS? That's right!!! What's his! Ok? Now, let - eheheheheh You're learning! Now, I'm asking: what's HERS and What's HERS? What's her surname? What's hers? Ok? What's hers? Ok? I think ahaha we have all the possessive pronouns! Uhm! Afonso?
45	Afonso	Ok!
46	Teacher	You can answer, you can answer, Afonso! So, what's your surname? What's hers?
47	Afonso	What's your surname?
48	Moana	Lobo!
49	Teacher	Lobo! Lobo!
50	Afonso	What's your surname? His surname is Nogueira!
51	Teacher	What's your surname?
52	Bento	Surname é Vergara!
53	Teacher	Vergara, Vergara! Lobo and Vergara! Ok? And What are their surnames? What are their surnames? What are THEIRS? What are THEIRS? Ok? What are their surnames? What are theirs? Uhm! Their surnames! What are theirs? I add, I add what are theirs?
54	Afonso	Like this?
55	Teacher	No, no! I repeat after what are their surnames, what are theirs! What are theirs! In the same line, yes!
58	Afonso	Theirs?
59	Teacher	Theirs, yes!
60	Afonso	Like there's?
61	Teacher	No, because you have here their, theirs! Have you seen? What do we have here? For instance! YOUR!
62	Students	Your, your!
63	Teacher	YOURS, ok? Here we have His! What's his? What's hers! But here we are asking for she, her, hers! Ok? And here we have, ehm we don't normally contract like this, ok? We don't normally do this!
64	Afonso	Ok! Ok!
65	Teacher	Their surnames! Their-theirs! Question mark! Ok? Their surnames are? Do you remember?
66	Bento	Vergara!
67	Teacher	Vergara
68	Afonso	Vergara ehm Jorge!

Figure 2

Illustration of How Learners' Input Formed Part of the Fluid manual (from Broccia, 2025, Raw Fluid manual)

How to use the possessive pronouns

Teacher: What's your surname?

Hadassa: My surname is Jorge.

Teacher: What's yours?

Tiago: My surname is Nogueira. / Mine is Nogueira.

Teacher: Then I ask you: my surname is Bernardo. What's his? What's hers?

Afonso: Her surname is Lobo and his surname is Nogueira.

T: What are their surnames? What are theirs?

Afonso: Their surnames are Lobo, Vergara, Jorge, Nogueira, Morozova.

Activity: Fill in the grid. Pronouns replace nouns, therefore we use adjectives before the noun (This is my bike) and no noun after the pronoun (This is mine)

Personal pronouns	Possessive adjectives	Possessive pronouns
I		MINE
YOU		
HE		HIS
SHE		
IT	ITS	ITS
WE	OUR	
YOU		
THEY	THEIR	

Overall, the fluid approach's prioritization of students' values, goals, emotions, worldviews, and perspectives is evident in the teacher's consistent openness to students' utterances and his engagement with the authentic meaning behind their initiatives. As further illustrated in the excerpt presented in Table 4, although the teacher retains a central role, his dialogic stance (lines 2, 7, 9, 11) cultivates a learning environment in which students are empowered to engage in critical reflection and take ownership of their learning (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012). This dynamic is evident when, for example, Graciano (lines 1, 2, 8, 10) and Denisa (line 4) articulate personal reflections on their educational experiences, demonstrating Bakhtinian notions of dialogic self-expression (Bakhtin, 1981). Figure 3 below further illustrates the emerging content that formed part of the fluid manual corresponding to the preceding dialogic interaction centered around Graciano's doubt.

Table 4

Interaction Excerpt from the Second Lesson of A2/B1 Course

1	Graciano	Professor? <i>*Teacher?*</i>
2	Teacher	Sim? <i>*Yes?*</i>
3	Graciano	Sim! <i>*Yes!*</i>
4	Denisa	Eu, professor, só estava a dar um exemplo do que o professor acabou de falar na atenção da instrução e eu automaticamente estava pensando em minho caso, porque ... <i>*I, teacher, was just giving an example on what the teacher just said about the attention on instructions and I, automatically, was thinking of my case, because...*</i>
5	Teacher	Sim, sim! Não, não há problema, porque quando estamos numa situação real, tu podes pensar, mas, iih, acontece que nas provas, nas provas de línguas, nas provas de, de mais disciplinas, as instruções dizem que contam demasiado, ok? Contam demasiado. As vezes são mais as instruções porque uma pessoa sabe, mas não consegue seguir as instruções, ok? <i>*Yes, yes! No, there is no problem, because when we are in a real situation, you can think, but, iih, it happens that during the tests, during language tests, during tests of, of different subjects, instructions are said that count a lot, ok? They count a lot. Sometimes instructions count more because a person knows, but doesn't manage to follow instructions, ok?*</i>
6	Denisa	É verdade! <i>*It's true!*</i>
7	Teacher	Iih! Graciano?
8	Graciano	Professor, fala de perguntas para os colegas também. Aproveito neste gancho da, da questão do, do "have" e do "have got" e de facto na prática a gente vê que o "have got" é mais inglês britânico! Fica aqui a dúvida no estudo do inglês ... <i>*Teacher, I'm talking about questions for my colleagues as well! I'll take advantage of this "hook" on the issue of "have" and "have got" and of the fact that in practice, we can see that "have got" is more British English! The doubt here remains regarding the study of English...*</i>
9	Teacher	Sim! <i>*Yes!*</i>
10	Graciano	Vale a pena a gente se apegar a um, a um dos métodos e seguir e só depois de você está no nível avançado, partir para o outro ou um estudo paralelo? Confunde, não? <i>*Is it worth if we follow one, only one of the methods and only when you reach a more advanced level, start with the other one or ...*</i>
11	Teacher	Sim! Sim! Com certeza, com certeza! <i>*Yes! Yes! Sure, sure!*</i>

Figure 3

Illustration of How Learners' Input Formed Part of the Fluid manual (from Broccia, 2025, Raw Fluid manual)

Both To have and to have got mean possession. However, they have a different construction for interrogative and negative sentences.

How many brothers has she got?

How many brothers does she have?

Complete with the verb "have got"

I __have got____ three brothers= I have three brothers

She __has got____ a very luxury car= she has a very luxury car.

They _____ a big house

We _____ a beautiful garden.

To have got

You have got a computer

Int. Have you got a computer?

Neg. You haven't got a computer

To have

You have a computer

Int. Do you have a computer?

Data collection and analysis

To examine the impact of the fluid language teaching approach, and in particular the fluid manual, on learners' perception of their learning, we conducted a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) using a semi-structured guide (Silva et al., 2014), and complemented it with semi-structured individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), with volunteering course participants. The semi-structured FGD guide (see Appendix A) was based on previous studies that implemented FGDs to better understand students' perceptions of dialogue-based teaching methods (Brooman et al., 2015; Crites & Rye, 2020; Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Hansen, 2020; Lin, 2019; Sarani & Malmir, 2019).

There were two FGDs, one for each course. They were held in the same classroom as the English lessons but with desks set in a circle and the students facing each other and the FGD conductor. Seven students participated in the first course group discussion and five participated in the second. Participation was on a voluntary basis. The FGDs were conducted by two independent researchers (to avoid bias from the teacher leading the discussion), who had been previously trained to conduct FGDs. One of them already had some experience. The two FGDs were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interviews were chosen to complement the FGDs, because they allow investigating participants' points of view in more depth (Kvale, 1996), contributing to the validity and reliability of the research. The use of a semi-structured interview enabled the teacher-researcher⁴ to expand on interviewees' responses to better understand participants' perceptions of the teaching approach. For the interviews, we used a semi-structured guide composed of five main questions (see Appendix B). Participation in the interview was voluntary. In total, there were 15 participants, seven students from the A1 course and eight from the A2-B1 course. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Both FGDs and interviews were carried out just after the end of the courses.

These two main data collection methods were completed using an anonymous online questionnaire composed of five items, a closed question, and four open-ended ones (see Appendix C). We formulated the questions based on Lin's (2019) questionnaire, focusing on students' perceptions of using open educational resources instead of a traditional textbook. The questionnaire was composed of open questions, which, although sometimes difficult to analyze, can lead to discovering new insights (Gillham, 2007). Questions asked whether learners had already experienced a textbook-free approach, what they enjoyed most in the fluid approach, if they felt they had learned better or not, and what challenges they experienced. We opted to add the questionnaire as a data collection method because, by guaranteeing anonymity, students could feel freer to express authentic opinions, often restrained by the presence of the teacher and other researchers.

Finally, field notes were used as a fourth data collection method. Field notes represent an important data collection method in qualitative research (Philippi & Lauderdale, 2018). In this study, field notes were systematically taken from the beginning, when entering into contact with prospective participants, and continued till the end of the two courses, including notes on the lessons, on the FGDs, and interviews with the participants. Field notes contain a lot of information that helped to frame the study in time, location, and population, identifying the participants, and contextualizing data interpretation (Philippi & Lauderdale, 2018). In this study, field notes were particularly important because the approach did not adopt a pre-defined curriculum. Therefore, a diary was kept both on the lessons planned and the lessons actually carried out.

The two FGDs, the 15 interviews, as well as students' answers to the questionnaire's open questions, were transcribed and analyzed through a thematic analysis, carried out following Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) methods. Themes relating to students' perceptions or opinions were identified through a process of open coding. First, identification of codes was done by transcribing the lessons into an Excel file, then utterances were segmented, in a new row, every time a new code was identified (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Codes were carefully labelled so as to enable the researcher to recover the same codes and find the exact location of a coded text unit and its context (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). The transcripts were read and reread several times to identify and verify recurrent codes. To enhance reliability, codes were first identified by the first author and then verified by the second author following an independent bottom-up analysis. Codes were then sorted and collated into thematic categories in an inductive way, not

⁴ In contrast to the FGDs, which were carried out by two independent researchers, the interviews were carried out by the teacher-researcher himself.

driven by the study's theoretical interest, but emerging from the data itself (Nowell et al., 2017; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The creation of the thematic categories and their subsequent organization into thematic dimensions was also repeated by the second author, to confirm or not the options initially made by the first author. Discrepancies were discussed, and a consensus was reached.

Findings: Learners' perceptions of the fluid manual

Two dimensions emerged from the thematic analysis, namely "perceptions of the teaching approach as a whole" and "perceptions of the fluid manual". In this article, we will only focus on the second dimension, directly related to the fluid manual.

Naming the thing

A meaningful difficulty in dealing with the fluid manual was to establish a well-defined way of naming it. During the English course, the teacher avoided calling the digital textbook "fluid" and used other terms such as "shared file" or "online file". On the contrary, in the questions both of the interview and the FGDs, the expressions "fluid manual" and "fluid textbook" were used. The presence of various ways to refer to the co-constructed digital logbook was also reflected in participants' words, who often expressed difficulty defining what it was. This difficulty to "name the thing" is evident in the following words by Anita (A1, interview): *"I, after, I remembered some things when I saw what the teacher sent us. How is that thing that the teacher kept showing us called?"*.

Not fixing a clear definition also meant that participants used different names to refer to it. Bento (A2-B1, Interview) in his interview referred to the fluid manual as "the file", "the book file", "the shared file", "the manual", or simply "the book". Mara (A2-B1, Interview) described it as "the file that flowed." Afra (A1 – Interview) defined it as "a notebook constructed together with us." In general, the participants also made use of the following alternative words or expressions to refer to the fluid manual: *book, digital textbook, document, dossier, flexible book, fluid textbook, fluid text, guide, interactive manual, manual, our manual, shared file, textbook, virtual book*.

The force of a habit

Need for structure/organization. Some students perceived the fluid manual construction process as disorganized. Denisa (A2-B1, FGD), referring to it, said: *"I think that the so-called 'fluid text', always going back to write a missing sentence here, and another missing sentence there, I thought it was very messy, the manual, being fluid like that."* Other participants noted this lack of an organized structure when comparing the fluid manual to a conventional textbook. Moana (A2-B1, FGD), for instance, said: "I was a bit confused. I missed having everything organized!"

Others expressed the necessity to rearrange its contents to improve its design. Afonso (A2-B1, FGD), for instance, expressed himself with the following words:

As for the difficulty that my colleagues have raised with the method, I also think that, in fact, it's the difficulty that they have, um, I've already told the teacher that maybe it would be better to have a final chapter with the grammar questions, or with what we're learning, in a more systematized way, in other words, to have the "fluid", but then also to have a final chapter with the more systematized things, in any case.

Some students tried to overcome this difficulty by themselves. They rearranged the raw fluid manual into a personalized learning tool. Afonso (A2-B1, FGD) explained what he did: "The method I adopted to try and get around this was to do something a little more systematic myself, with rules, in my

notebook.” Bento (A2-B1, FGD) adopted a similar approach: “So what I did, I took that, too, because I got into my notebook, and tried to more or less tidy it up, to try to figure out my organization.”

In the anonymous questionnaire, a student pointed out how the lack of organization of the fluid manual could lead “the students to organize these aspects in their study - this is what I adopted and helped me a lot” (Anonymous, A2-B1, Questionnaire). The participant continued by recognizing how the students’ contribution in reorganizing the fluid manual “can also have a potential because it forces the student to have an autonomous study.”

Before the end of the two courses, following some students’ informal feedback, the teacher inserted a table of contents and turned the “raw” fluid manual into a structured textbook (see Broccia, 2025, for both). The rearranged version was generally perceived as better than the unstructured one. Afonso (A2-B1, Interview), however, seemed to prefer the former:

The second version of the manual was already more organized, but I think it was important that it wasn't organized from the start, because when I spoke to other colleagues, I realized that this led to people studying at home and doing this synthesis themselves. That's very interesting. In other words, what could have been a weakness of the method, I think, ended up translating into a strength.

Feeling or not the traditional textbook absence. Some students expressed an initial feeling of surprise or even disorientation created by the absence of a traditional textbook, as in the quotations below:

Yes, um, at first I found it curious, because usually, like, when, when, I remember, like in support, right? And the first thing they do in these first classes is ask for the textbook! (Paloma, A1, Interview)

It was a challenge at first, because I came from school. I was always used to having a textbook, so at first I thought: ok, there's no grammar here! Where am I going to look up grammar now? What, no, no, if I don't remember the grammar, or if I don't remember the verbs at all, how am I going to look up the verbs now? (Alexandra, A2-B1, Interview)

However, the majority of the students did not feel that the absence of the textbook had a negative impact on their learning process:

I believe it didn't, that it didn't influence, it didn't! It was super easy, without a textbook. (Lena, A1, FGD)

I didn't feel the absence, hmm, of the traditional textbook. I didn't. (Celsa, A1, Interview)

I, I, didn't feel its absence. (Anita, A1, Interview)

On the contrary, many of them said that the fluid manual was even better than the traditional book:

I don't think the absence of the book has been missed at all. It even influenced participation, the teacher's contact with the student. (Denisa, A2-B1, FGD)

That was even more advantageous than the book, the book perhaps. The physical book, leafing through the search, all the books have an index, but I think this has replaced, perfectly replaced the book. (Anita, A1, Interview)

It's the first time I've had a course without the manual, but I didn't have any problems; on the contrary, I learned a lot. The guiding document that the teacher provided us served perfectly! (Anonymous, A1, Questionnaire)

Efficacy of the fluid manual

Accessibility. Many of the participants mentioned the easiness to access the fluid manual as a prior positive aspect of it, together with the fact of not having any cost:

I like it because afterwards, since it's online, it's more practical to see what we taught in the previous class, to study and that's it! To study and revise what we gave! (Naísa, A1, Interview) and also because it's easy, easily accessible, and not expensive. It doesn't cost money. (Raissa, A1, FGD)

I think that the fluid manual is good because we manage to access it every day, eh! (Alexandra, A2-B1, interview)

Flexibility. Although a few participants had some initial problems regarding the lack of organization of the contents, which was resolved later by the teacher as previously mentioned, some found its flexibility to be an added value to their learning process. For instance, Bento (A2-B1, Interview) found it very positive that they did not have to follow any pre-established sequence:

This left us freer, and I think that, for me, it was better than to be there and only follow a book and go step by step, and after never turn back on those doubts that I had, in relation to that content. (Bento, A2-B1, Interview)

Another student referred to this flexibility as essential also for beginners:

The advantage, um, is that it can be shaped, can't it? You can, you can write what you need, not what, in general, you think a beginner student needs. That's very good! (Celsa, A1, FGD)

Other students added that this flexibility in the structure and contents also led to faster learning, because it allowed a more explicit focus on students' missing knowledge, rather than already acquired information:

[...] the main point of the course is that it has this flexibility and allows us to advance more quickly because it's not focusing on things we already have (Afonso, A2-B1, Interview)

Participation/interaction. Many students related the absence of a traditional textbook to greater participation and interaction, which subsequently helped their learning. For instance, Afra (A1, Interview) mentioned:

Eh, because if the teacher came in with the book, now there's a book, take a book, go read the book, maybe it would have been much more difficult for us, but it wasn't, because we interacted with the teacher, we talked, we talked to each other, the students too. So it was very important because we practiced speaking, didn't we? Communication in English! (Afra, A1, Interview)

Other students referred to this increased interaction due to the lack of the textbook as well:

Interaction between students was greater without the textbook, I thought! (Moana, A2-B1, FGD)
I think that it made, ... made it more interactive (Denisa, A2-B1, Interview).

Not having a textbook and building up a course notebook with the availability of a shared file, the lessons were participatory and enlightening. There was room for dialogue and interaction between students and between students and the teacher. (Anonymous, A2-B1, Questionnaire).

Learning trace. Many students referred to the main function of the fluid manual as one of leaving a "learning trace," functioning as a shared memory artefact. Here are some quotations illustrating this:

I think it's great, because it's good for us to review some things that may not have been assimilated in class, also learned, and then it's a file that we can go and remember, ask questions, because it's all there transcribed what happened in class, and even the questions that went beyond the scope of what we were learning, but were recorded, and therefore, this file is precious, for sure! (Raissa, A1, Interview)

In this case, it was a more fluid course, in other words, the teacher would write down everything we said in Word, which was good because it was as if we had, let's say there was a series, because we could see what we were saying and with this we could sometimes understand our mistakes and it was as if we had the subtitles of a series, which was very good. I really liked that! (Alexandra, A2-B1, Interview)

Adding to the above idea, some students mentioned the fact that the fluid book was evolving with them. In Paloma's words:

I was learning with the book, although the normal is that we learn from the book, the book has the rules which we learn, but this one [the fluid manual] I felt that it was evolving according to each lesson. (Paloma, A1, Interview)

The situated nature of the fluid manual was very well perceived, also in relation to learners' emotions, and their presence in the learning trace:

The manual had to do with what we were doing, ... there's something we've been doing throughout the lessons that has more to do with us and I think emotion is very important in learning. Emotion has to exist, otherwise nobody learns, and there, how it had to do with us, it had happened, it had to do with phrases that someone had said and that the teacher had taken the opportunity to write there, we even remembered it to write the lesson again, you know what I mean? Anita (A1 - Interview)

Learner-centeredness. All the above relates to a principal characteristic of the fluid manual, as perceived by the participants: its focus on students' needs. Many students mentioned that the fluid manual was personalized, as it was designed to meet specific learners' needs and challenges:

The class was really heterogeneous, very different. There were people with lots of difficulties, and the teacher always adapted the contents and the material to the different students (Mafalda, A1, Interview)

It's good because it's not that patronized thing! It's according to your needs at the time (Denisa, A2-B1, FGD)

That meets the concrete problems of the students and the students' mistakes, and if we're going to follow a textbook, we're going to follow the textbook and not exactly the difficulties that the students are experiencing at that moment. I think that was very important [...] And it's almost like a textbook adapted to the students who are there, and not a standard textbook that's going to be used by I don't know how many students [...] Bearing in mind that we're not all the same, we're not all going to learn in the same way, and it ends up being almost a personalized textbook [...] (Cristina, A2-B1, Interview)

So we have a book that ends up being that fluid manual, which he, which he, which we built with our doubts and with the clarifications he gave us, and I think it's very much geared towards the class, towards each one of us! It's not institutionalized teaching. I think that's important! (Mara, A2-B1, FGD)

The fluid approach was very helpful to me, and I learned much more from this approach than textbooks because textbooks are more formal and may not fit the specific needs of students!

(Anonymous, A1, Questionnaire)

Going further, Afonso (A2-B1, Interview) connected this learner-centeredness with greater motivation from the students: *"It's more motivating because, as it has to do with us, the [learning] goals are our goals."*

Discussion

The implementation of the fluid manual, as a polyphonic alternative to the traditional manual, revealed its significant potential for fostering dialogic, socially situated learning, while also highlighting key constraints related to the need for structure, teacher identity, and practical implementation.

The nature of the fluid manual

The adult learners' perceptions of the fluid manual point to a fundamentally dialogic and socially situated learning experience, aligning closely with Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and Matusov's (2009) emphasis on dialogic pedagogy. The recurring difficulty in "naming the thing," where learners variably called the textbook a "shared file," "fluid manual," or even "our book," is more than just a terminological confusion; it reflects the instability of a living, evolving artefact co-constructed through dialogic interaction. In Bakhtinian terms, this illustrates heteroglossia, i.e., the presence of multiple voices and meanings that defy singular authoritative definition. What is more, the fluid manual resists being a closed, finalized conjunction of utterances; instead, it remains open-ended and responsive to learner contributions, emblematic of a "chronotope" (Bakhtin, 1981) that embodies the time-space of the participants' learning process. In more concrete terms, the learners' difficulty to "name the thing" may also reflect Saussure's (1959) distinction between *la langue* and *la parole*, with the former referring to the socially shared abstract language system (i.e. what a textbook generally implies) and the latter to the individual side of language in use (i.e. what the fluid manual meant for each one of the participants). This distinction, although later criticized by Volosinov (1973/1930) as being deficient in depicting language's social positioning and ideological significance, is still valid when it comes to affirming the shortcomings of language as a naming process, as often there is not a direct or unique association between the signifier and the signified, or simply put, between the word and its meaning (Joseph, 2022).

Matusov's (2009) interpretation of dialogism further helps make sense of how the absence of a fixed textbook and its replacement with a co-authored, evolving document fostered learner agency. For Matusov, dialogic education does not aim to transmit pre-established truths but rather engages students in meaning-making as participants in authentic dialogues. This approach is echoed in the learners' reports of enhanced participation, personalization, and interactivity, such as Afra's observation that without a textbook, "we talked, we talked to each other, the students too." Here, the fluid manual does not serve as an inert medium of instruction, but as an emergent product of the learners' dialogic engagement, co-produced through social interaction and reflective of their evolving understandings.

This conception also resonates strongly with cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), particularly its emphasis on mediation and the dynamic nature of learning as a culturally embedded process. The fluid manual functioned as a mediating artifact within the broader activity system of the classroom, shaped by the participants' goals, histories, and tools. Learners not only used the textbook to access content but also actively transformed it, sometimes reorganizing it to reflect their own learning structures. As Afonso stated, "The method I adopted...was to do something a little more systematic myself, with rules, in my notebook." Such transformations exemplify the CHAT principle of tool appropriation, where learners mold mediating artifacts to meet their personal and collective needs (Engeström, 1987).

Moreover, the fluid manual operated as a shared memory artefact, preserving not only factual knowledge but also the affective and dialogic history of the classroom. For example, Raissa described the file as “precious,” since it “transcribed what happened in class,” capturing both content and the “questions that went beyond.” This shared trace served cognitive and affective functions, enabling learners to revisit prior moments of meaning-making. This emotional resonance was explicitly noted by Anita, who remarked that “emotion is very important in learning” and that the textbook’s content—drawn from learners’ own utterances—helped them remember and connect with the material. In Bietti’s (2010) terms, the fluid manual supports an “interactional remembering,” where the pedagogical record becomes meaningful precisely because it is embedded in a shared social context.

The tension between fluidity and structural normativity

Despite valuing its dialogic nature, an intriguing tension emerged as many learners expressed a need to reorganize or “sanitize”⁵ the fluid manual’s contents into more conventional structures. Students found the “messiness” of the raw fluid manual disorienting and often created indexes or reordered content in personal notebooks. This student-initiated restructuring can be interpreted as demonstrating learner autonomy and metacognitive engagement, as students transformed the material to suit individual preferences. Learners’ initial calls for more structure, while appearing as resistance to the fluid manual, can be reframed through Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD). The initial discomfort and subsequent self-organization demonstrate learners negotiating their position within the ZPD, where the absence of predetermined structure compels them to actively engage with and reorganize their learning environment. As Afonso insightfully noted in his interview, the unstructured nature initially seen as a weakness turned into a strength, fostering autonomy and deeper synthesis.

On the other hand, this need to impose structure may also reveal the powerful ideological force of conventional textbook literacy. The fluid manual, with its chronological accumulation of dialogic moments, violated established expectations and created cognitive dissonance. This suggests that fully embracing materials that embody radical departures from established formats can be challenging, as the manual’s fluidity challenged not only pedagogical norms but also learners’ epistemological assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge. In this sense, learners’ impulse to structure the manual may also reflect their navigation of two competing discourses: the internally persuasive discourse of their lived, dialogic learning experience and the authoritative discourse of conventional educational materials. However, such conflicts between internally persuasive and authoritative discourses are characteristic moments of transformation, where learners (and teachers) must negotiate between established norms and emerging, more personally meaningful ways of knowing (Matusov, 2009; Uştuk & Yazan, 2024)

Dialogue, norms, power, and authority: Reflections on teacher identity and expertise

The implementation of the fluid approach raises critical questions about teacher professional identity, particularly regarding the tensions between embracing dialogic pedagogy and maintaining the structural authority traditionally associated with the teaching role. As Britzman (2003) observes, learning to teach involves navigating the tension between institutional expectations that position teachers as transmitters of predetermined knowledge and the lived reality of teaching as a dynamic, relational practice—a tension that becomes particularly acute when adopting approaches that fundamentally redistribute pedagogical authority.

In the fluid approach, a tension between genuine dialogic exploration and meaning making, on one hand, and the need for structure and precision, on the other, was evident. As with any pedagogical setting, a predetermined relationship was established: the students on one side and a person responsible for

⁵ We thank an anonymous reviewer for their observation regarding learners’ effort to “sanitize” the raw manual.

guiding them on the other. In this sense, it can be argued that even within a dialogic framework, the course retained an instrumental aspect, as highlighted by Miyazaki (in Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014). Moreover, as the object of teaching and learning was language and the learners' level was not advanced, some structural rules regarding linguistic, grammatical, and syntactic forms had to be prioritized so learners could express themselves. In this sense, the dialogic exploration was often limited to exploring learners' personal needs and goals related to language learning, rather than genuine meaning-making using the foreign language, which was quite impossible for most learners. We cannot, therefore, assume that the fluid approach adopted in our study was an example of "critical dialogue", presented as the ultimate dialogic approach to education by Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane (2012), but more an example of "open participatory socialization," described as typical of communities of practice in the same framework. Moreover, teaching for ideological becoming requires a strong, powerful voice and authorship rooted in a strong discursive community (Matusov, 2007), which obviously lacks in a classroom of foreign language beginners.

As Uştuk and Yazan (2024) articulate in their Bakhtinian approach to teacher identity, teachers inevitably experience identity tensions as they encounter contradictions between different discursive positions—in our case, between the monologic teacher-as-expert and the dialogic teacher-as-collaborator. The first author's professional trajectory, moving from teaching a minority language without materials to implementing this approach in English language contexts, exemplifies this identity work. Teaching without textbooks necessitated developing pedagogical intuition, attunement to student needs, and comfort with emergent curriculum—capacities that challenged deeply held professional identities rooted in expertise, control, and curricular mastery. In the fluid approach, the teacher must develop comfort with uncertainty, improvisation, and the partial relinquishment of the traditional power to determine what counts as curriculum. In action research contexts like this one, teacher-researchers often rely on what might be termed "gut feelings" or pedagogical intuition (Burns & Williams, 2023) when making in-the-moment decisions about curriculum direction, activity design, and interaction management.

This raises important questions about the replicability and scalability of the fluid approach. Can it be successfully implemented by teachers without the first author's particular combination of linguistic expertise, minoritized language teaching experience, theoretical grounding in dialogism, and comfort with pedagogical improvisation? What forms of teacher education would prepare educators to adopt such approaches? And what institutional conditions (time, class size, administrative support, assessment flexibility) are necessary for dialogic pedagogy to flourish? This is not to suggest that only exceptional teachers can engage in dialogic pedagogy, but rather to emphasize that successful implementation requires specific capacities that must be developed intentionally. Teacher education programs wishing to prepare educators for such approaches would need to focus not only on theoretical understanding of dialogism but also on cultivating the practical wisdom, emotional attunement, and pedagogical courage that dialogic teaching demands. This might include extended practice teaching with mentorship, opportunities to observe skilled dialogic facilitators, reflective activities that surface and examine pedagogical intuitions, and explicit attention to the identity work involved in repositioning oneself as a co-learner rather than a sole expert.

Within the above limitations, the adult participants in the two English courses perceived the dialogically co-constructed, fluid manual as a positive alternative to the traditional language textbook at both levels (A1 and A2-B1). Further studies could investigate whether a similar approach could also be efficient for higher language levels and different contexts. We should mention that the context of our study was quite specific, as the courses were offered free of charge as part of the action research PhD project of the first author, in which the students voluntarily participated. This itself created an informal, relaxed atmosphere, which could have been missed if the courses were more institutionalized. Moreover, learners' motivation was quite high, related to personal needs and goals for learning English as adults, which contrasts with other studies in which English is imposed as a predominant, Westernized language that is not always meaningful to learners (see, for example, Lin & Luk, 2004).

Conclusion

This action research study examined adult English language learners' perceptions of the fluid manual—a pedagogical resource co-constructed dynamically through classroom dialogue—as an alternative to traditional foreign language textbooks. Data collected through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and anonymous questionnaires revealed that participants experienced the fluid manual as highly personalized, accessible, and responsive to their specific learning needs. Despite initial difficulties with terminology and structure, which some learners addressed through self-initiated reorganization, the majority of participants valued the approach's flexibility and learner-centeredness. Notably, learners perceived the absence of a traditional textbook as fostering greater interaction among students and between students and teacher, creating space for authentic communicative practice. The co-constructed manual was described as reflecting participants' voices, questions, and lived experiences in ways that pre-packaged materials could not. However, the study also identified challenges, including learners' need to “sanitize” the manual's raw, conversational flow into more structured formats—suggesting an internalized preference for conventional textbook organization. Future research should explore the applicability of this approach across different proficiency levels, institutional contexts, and cultural settings, while attending to the teacher expertise required to sustain such dialogic pedagogies.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured FGD Guide

- 1) What did you like most of the course? (Indicate possibly three items)
- 2) What didn't you like? (Indicate possibly three items)
- 3) What do you think of the textbook-free approach?
- 4) What do you think of the idea of the "fluid manual"? Pros and cons?
- 5) What do you think about how the teacher interacted with you during the course?
- 6) How did the absence of a textbook influence the relationship with the teacher?
- 7) Did the absence of a pre-established curriculum contribute to consider learners' needs?
- 8) How did you feel during this course? Were these feelings different than in other more traditional teaching approaches?
- 9) How would you compare this teaching approach to others? Would you continue with it?
- 10) What would you change in the way this course was held?

APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Warm-up question/introduction/icebreaker: So, what do you think of the course?

- 1) Can you think of three things that you liked and three things that could be improved?
- 2) How did you feel during the English course?
- 3) What do you think of the absence of the textbook, and therefore the absence of a pre-established curriculum? (How did it make you feel?)
- 4) What do you think of the "fluid manual"? Pros and cons?
- 5) Would you like to add anything? Any recommendations for future courses? Anything to tell us?

APPENDIX C

Anonymous Questionnaire

- 1) Have you previously taken any courses where teaching and learning occurred without using a traditional textbook?
- 2) What aspects of using a fluid textbook did you find helpful or engaging in this course?
- 3) In what ways did the use of a fluid textbook support or differ from your learning experiences with traditional textbooks?
- 4) What challenges, if any, did you face when working with a fluid textbook in your learning and assignments?
- 5) How would you describe your overall experience in this course, and what factors contributed to it being helpful or not?

APPENDIX D

Interaction Excerpt (Last Lesson, Course A1) Showing Learners' Self-authorship and Autonomy in Relation to the Fluid Textbook

1	Teacher	Today is lesson?
2	Afra	Number 8.
3	Anita	Eu pensava que dizia a data. <i>*I thought that you would say the date.*</i>
4	Afra	Oh, professor eu já 'tou a aprender algumas coisas! <i>*Teacher, I am already learning some things!*</i>
5	Teacher	Agora vamos rever. <i>*Now, we'll revise.*</i>
6	Afra	Ahaha.
7	Anita	Pois tu imprimes todo? <i>*Therefore, you print everything?*</i>
8	Afra	Sim, imprimir todo. <i>*Yes, I printed everything.*</i>
9	Anita	Boa! <i>*Good!*</i>
10	Teacher	Sim, porque eu disse, eu disse que é como um manual! É verdadeiramente [...] posso ver? <i>*Yes, because I said, I said that it's like a manual! It's really [...] Can I see it?*</i>
11	Afra	Pode. <i>*Yes, you can.*</i>
12	Anita	Mas eu sou pelo ambiente. <i>*But I am for the environment.*</i>
13	Teacher	Estás a ver aqui? Aqui tu tens o, eu fiz o [...] <i>*Can you see here? Here you have the, I did the [...]*</i>
14	Anita	O índice. <i>*The index.*</i>
15	Teacher	O "table", o índice, o "table of contents". <i>*The table, the index, the table of contents.*</i>
16	Anita	Table of contents.
17	Teacher	Eh, se vocês têm, tem ou terem o Word, ok? <i>*Eh, if you have, have or had Word, ok?*</i>
18	Afra	Sim. <i>*Yes.*</i>
19	Teacher	Empurra aqui e chega na pagina. <i>*You click here, and you get to the page.*</i>
20	Afra	Sim. Exato. <i>*Yes. Correct.*</i>
21	Teacher	Exatamente. Greetings, saudações! Olha, este é o nosso livro, o que construímos juntos. <i>*Exactly! Greetings, greetings! Look, this is our book, the one we built up together.*</i>
22	Afra	Hmm, hmm!
23	Teacher	Eu tirei os exercícios, agora, não? Porque uma pessoa, aqui não tirei, mas um aluno pode fazer de novo. <i>*I took away the exercises, now, ok? Because a person, here I didn't, but a student can do it again.*</i>

24	Afra	Hmm, hmm!
25	Teacher	Por exemplo aqui. Aah, não coloquei as páginas, e depois, aah seria melhor talvez as páginas começam sempre em cima, não? <i>For instance, here. Aah, I didn't put the pages, and after, aah, perhaps it would be better the pages always began at the top, wouldn't it?*</i>
26	Afra	Hmm, hmm!
27	Teacher	Ah! Ok, ok. Para lesson number 4 é demasiado em baixo. Ok, vou fazer melhor. É bom. É bom. Depois vamos. They ask for [...] <i>*Aah, ok, ok. For lesson number 4 it's too much below. Ok, I will do it better. It's good. It's good. After we are going to do it. They ask for [...]*</i>
28	Anita	Eeh. Ja 'tá grande. Oohh, tanta coisa. Tão, tão, tão, tão. <i>*Eeh. It's already big. Oohh, a lot of stuff. So, so, so, so, so.*</i>
29	Teacher	Ahah. É o que fizemos, é? Não é mais, mais do que fizemos. É muita coisa fizemos. 20 horas. <i>*Ahah. It's what we did, isn't it? It's not more, more than what we did. We did a lot. 20 hours.*</i>
30	Afra	Fizemos. Já. <i>*We did! Yes!*</i>



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