EFL WRITING PRACTICE: AN ONLINE COMPLEX COURSE

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Abstract

The objective is to present an online writing course of English as a foreign language for High School teachers in public schools, in São Paulo, Brazil, designed according to the needs expressed by teachers working in this context and the Brazilian official documents, in light of the theory of complexity. In the first part, the teacher/researcher articulates the constructs considered in the design moment that regard complexity, writing production and instructional design. In the second part, she shares the design and implementation experiences and in the last part, a few reflections regarding the lived experience.

Introduction

This paper aims at presenting an online writing course of English as a foreign language for English High School teachers in public schools, in São Paulo, designed according to the needs expressed by teachers working in this context, as well as the ones perceived in the Brazilian official documents: *Proposta Curricular do Estado de São Paulo para a disciplina de Língua Estrangeira Moderna* (São Paulo, 2008) and *Cadernos* written by *Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo* (São Paulo, 2008a,b). However, it reveals a particular way of conceiving the course, as complexity is its foundation (Morin, 2005, 2008, 2006, among others), establishing a dialogue with the theoretical constructs, the course design and its implementation. Therefore, the teacher/researcher will: (1) discuss and articulate the main points of the theoretical background that guided the course, its design and implementation, (2) contextualize and present the complex online writing course of English as a foreign language for English High School teachers in public schools, and (3) comment and reflect on the experience.

The Theoretical Constructs

As the objective is to share the experience lived by me, a teacher/researcher, when designing an online writing course of English as a second language for public school teachers, there is the need to mention the main constructs that support it. Thus, in this section, I will present, discuss and articulate aspects related to complexity theory, writing and instructional design.

Complexity

According to D'Esposito (2010, 2012), the theory of complexity is the result of a collection of new conceptions, visions, discoveries and reflections (Morin, 2006,), in which the physical world is seen as a net of inter-related events and not a collection of isolated parts presented in a certain order. It articulates the

integrative thought, uniting and allowing a weave between the subject and the object, order and disorder, stability and movement, teacher and student (under this paradigm the student is not seen as an observer whose experience is not considered and the teacher as the person who details and transmits knowledge). It prioritizes the process (not only the product), dialogue and interactions; aims at non fragmentized, detached, individualized, reductive or compartmentalized knowledge (Behrens & Oliari, 2007; Moraes, 2006, 2008), and offers non linear and reductionists curricula, considering not only the reason but also all our sensations, emotions, feelings and intuitions (Morin, 2006; Moraes, 2006; Behrens & Oliari, 2007; Mariotti, 2007).

As stated by D'Esposito (2010, 2012), Morin (2005, p. 8) points out the substitution of the thought that isolates for one that unities, of the disjunctive and reductive thought for a complex one - "complex, in the original sense of the term *complexus:* what is weaved together" [1]. So, as mentioned above, knowledge, under the complexity perspective, is perceived and co-produced through our dialogue with the world (Morin, 2008), presupposing interaction with the object, the physical and social environments (Moraes, 2006). Knowledge would comprehend and stand, simultaneously, operations of linkage (conjunction, inclusion) and separation (differentiation, opposition, selection, exclusion) in a circular process (Morin, 2005) constituted by mutable variables, by means of mutual, non linear or pre-determined enrichments gradually created when exploring connections, relations, integrations, and by living the process (D'Esposito, 2012).

Morin (2005, 2006) proposes three interdependent principles[2] that help us think about complexity. *The principle of the recursive circuit* establishes that products and effects are producers and the cause of what is produced. *The hologrammatic principle* understands that not only the part is in the whole, but the whole is inscribed into the part so that it is possible to enrich the parts by the whole and vice versa, in a constant movement of knowledge production. *The dialogical principle* conceives dialogue among elements that seem to have an antagonistic relation such as order/disorder and reason/emotion, allowing us to keep duality, assuming rationally the inseparable that exists in contradictory notions and associate terms.

However, as the focus was to design an online writing course of English as a foreign language for English High School teachers, it was necessary to research about theories concerning writing, even if they have not been thought about under the complexity perspective.

Writing
I believe, as Zamel (1987), that writing is a process of self-negotiation and discovery of meaning(s) that requires generation, formulation and refinement of ideas; commitment; consciousness about a reader, and revision and interference during the process (Zamel, 1987). This process idea is also present in Cox's work (1994) but the author emphasizes that writing has the function of registering and keeping information, clarifying and sustaining thought and, in this whole process, it is the teacher's responsibility to observe

and be the facilitator, the model, the reader and sustainer who interferes in the work, structuring the writing and helping the writer understand it.

Grabe & Kaplan (1996) mention that, during the writing process, it is necessary to be able to organize information, develop fluency, gain control over the vocabulary, use more complex structures, acquire maturity in relation to the style, and reflect on its purpose and audience. According to them, procedures such as cooperative learning, and consciousness about the audience, language and editing, might be helpful in the process. In this continuous process, it is important to the writer to create a text having as references his previous experiences, transmit meanings using various formal aspects and transfer abilities and strategies from the mother tongue (Friedlanger, 1996). As Maybin (1996) affirms, at the end of the process, writers might have a sense of propriety in relation to the piece of writing, relating the classroom practice to the real world and feeling motivated once they experienced learning opportunities.

Although these aspects relate to writing in English as a mother tongue, and not always focus on the school context, it provides us similarities in relation to writing in a second language and, therefore, I believe they should be considered when thinking and planning a writing course of English as a second language.

But as my objective was to design an online writing course of English as a foreign language for English High School teachers, it was also important to pay attention and research about instructional design, which I present as follows.

Instructional Design
Focusing on and referring to the systematic development of the content, D'Esposito (2010, 2012) highlights the work of Driscoll (1998), Berge, Collins & Dougherty (2000), Abbey (2000), Fullmer-Umari (2000) and Horton (2000) that reinforce the importance of identifying the participants' needs, which will lead to the definition of the objectives, the phases learners will go through and the tools. As Driscoll (1998) affirms, a "good design" meets the identified needs and requires: interactivity with the system, participants and the instructor; non linearity; an easy interface; structured lessons; effective use of the multimedia; attention to technological and educational details such as clear objectives, practice opportunities and meaningful feedback; students' control, and an environment in which participants are valued as individuals.

Besides that, according to Driscoll (1998, p. 26), attention should be given to the adequate type of program: *web/computer-based training, web/electronic performance support system, web/virtual asynchronous classroom*, or *web/virtual synchronous classroom.* The *web/computer-based training* focuses on individual learning and features drill and practice, simulations, reading, questioning, and answering. The *web/electronic performance support system* refers to just-in-time training, focusing on problem-solving, scientific, experiential or project method. The *web/virtual asynchronous classroom*

employs experiential tasks, discussions, and team projects, in a non-real-time group learning while the *web/virtual synchronous classroom* offers real-time collaborative group learning that uses discussions, problem solving, and reflection.

It is also important to focus on the commitment, responsibility and participation expected; objectives and deadlines definition; number of participants; adequate time to the activities; and establishment of rules and procedures, rhythm and feedback (Horton, 2000). It is important as well to consider the equipment available and how teacher and students deal with it; the learning theories implicit and the methods; the clarity and quality of the materials selected; the content and validity of instructions; how the implementation and follow up will permeate the process, and the evaluation of the phases will occur to assure that the objectives are reached and the course revised (Driscoll, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Berge, Collins & Dougherty, 2000; Abbey, 2000; Fullmer-Umari, 2000; Horton, 2000).

Filatro (2003, p. 64-65, 2008, p. 3), according to D'Esposito (2012), sees instructional design as an intentional and systematic action that aims at facilitating learning and involves planning, development and application of methods, techniques, activities, materials, events and products in specific didactic situations. It is known as ADDIE as it involves: (a) *analysis* – identification of the implementation and the learning needs; the technological infrastructure and available media; the establishment of objectives, and knowledge about the students' profile; (b) *design* - creation of a team and curricula; selection of the pedagogical and the technological strategies, and schedule definition; (c) *development* – pedagogical and technological definitions; production and adaptation of material, and teachers and tutors formation; (d) *implementation* of the didactic situation and the application of the proposal, and (e) *evaluation* of the course, system and analysis of the technological and pedagogical structures.

This model is characterized by a separation in its concept and execution phases and Filatro (2003, 2008) recognizes that they cannot be seen in isolation. Thus, the author proposes the *contextualized instructional design* in which the ADDIE operation would occur "recursively along the process, without involving any degree of absolute prediction or prescription" (D'Esposito, 2012, p. 116). Although some aspects mentioned by Filatro (2003, 2008) when she proposes the contextualized instructional design meet the theory of complexity, we cannot consider it a complex proposal due to the fact that, when she shows us a model, we can notice that the whole course is designed beforehand and all the activities are pre-established and only adapted later in the implementation moment. Therefore, I concluded that there is not a theoretical model for the design of a complex course. This became a challenge to me.

The Course Design and Implementation

The online writing course design had different phases that were not isolated but inter-connected ones, as they resulted and depended on the previous ones.

Moreover, the events did not happen in isolation or separate from each other but concurrently. They were connected, woven, creating a net. However, for didactic reasons, and with the objective of making the path taken clearer to the reader I present them here one by one.

Phase 1

Considering that the focus was a writing course of English as a foreign language for English High School teachers in public schools, in São Paulo, designed according to their needs and the ones perceived in the Brazilian official documents, in a first phase, I counted on the participation of 14 teachers/respondents[3] that answered a questionnaire by me devised that aimed at identifying their: (a) professional and personal needs in relation to writing in Portuguese and English; (b) students' relation to writing; (c) familiarity with the computer and online courses, and (4) needs and expectations in relation to an online writing course. It revealed that the teachers needed to write e-mails and tests in English, to teach mainly e-mails, formal and informal letters, descriptions and accounts, and that they expected a course that would deal mainly with e-mails, letters, descriptions, accounts and articles.

Two Brazilian documents that permeate the lives of teachers were also analysed: *Proposta Curricular do Estado de São Paulo para a disciplina de Língua Estrangeira Moderna* (São Paulo, 2008) and *Cadernos* (São Paulo, 2008a,b). The first one presents the principles that guide the work to be done, guaranteeing knowledge and competence so that the schools could, in fact, work as a net, allowing the development and the articulation of the necessary competences to face the modern world and also contextualizing to the job market, prioritizing reading and writing (São Paulo, 2008, p. 8-11). The second, the *Cadernos*, complements the first document by presenting learning situations to guide the teacher's work.

Considering the official documents the type of texts[4] the teachers would need to explore with their students were cards with personal information, posters, descriptions, e-mails, leaflets, film reviews, curriculum, accounts of experiences, among others.

At this phase, I also contacted high school teachers from public institutions looking for participants for the course.

Phase 2

Having the information from the respondents and the documents and aiming at designing an online course with knowledge construction understood as systemic and complex, in which writing would be seen as a process, in light of the theory of complexity (Morin, 2005, 2006), in this phase, I initiated the course design.

One of the first decisions taken was in relation to its environment; the platform Moodle[5]. The decision for Moodle, instead of isolated tools, was to provide a centralized learning environment that could ease access, in which information could be displayed, activities done, reflections presented and communication established. It would also provide teachers a new type of exploration and

experience and an adequate space for writing production, negotiation and self-negotiation of meaning. Not having any technical support, the platform and its tools were thoroughly explored by me. The objective was to get acquainted to its potential and limitations as well as to define its appearance, how elements would be displayed and the course organized. I decided to organize it in *moments* and not in weeks so that each could correspond to a phase of the process and be inter-related to the other ones; therefore, a moment could last days while another take weeks. It is important, though, to highlight that, in light of the complexity theory, the course cannot be closed in itself and totally planned beforehand.

However, I felt the need for theoretical support and I searched for proposals, studies or courses conceived in light of complexity. I came across Behrens (2006) and her proposal entitled Methodology of Projects that aims at promoting an educational activity (an investigation of a certain problem) that culminates in knowledge construction with autonomy and critical spirit. The learning has as starting points situations, which she called problems, that would provide students with individual and group opportunities to search for answers with commitment, critical vision and ethics; allowing students proximity with situations that they might face, and contact with different forms of learning that would allow them to learn to learn without memorizing information.

Behrens (2006, p. 60 -72) proposes phases, which are not disconnected from each other or rules to be followed step by step for a Methodology:
1. Presentation and discussion of the project: opens space for suggestions and reconstruction.
2. Problem statement: starting point for the discussion, involving students on the project theme (problems should be part of the students reality and consider their experiences and interests).
3. Contextualization: the teacher should help students to delineate the investigation objective and alert them on how to search for information that could contribute and help answer questionings.
4. Theoretical/dialogical classes.
5. Individual research
6. Individual production: students present their opinions and productions based on the research done individually and share it with the group.
7. Group, critical and reflexive discussion.
8. Group production: allows to inter-connect the individual productions;.
9. Final production: teachers and students discuss the possibilities of application of the individual and group productions.
10. Learning evaluation: permeates the whole process and counts with the students' participation.
11. Project evaluation: allows the students to express themselves about the experiences lived along the process.

Another possibility is stated by Freire (2009) who suggests to provide teachers with a *situation* (not necessarily lived), close to their reality that would allow the presentation of possibilities and/or proposals that would lead to a discussion recollecting theoretical constructs, their practical and/or tacit

knowledge the articulation between theory and practice. Sharing experiences that they would have the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice.

Considering and reflecting upon the constructs previously mentioned, I decided to provide participants with a *real learning situation*: a situation that is, was or would be part of the teachers' professional or personal lives, exposing them to something real that would lead to a discussion, encourage the search for new information, individual and group research and production, using their theoretical-methodological-experiential knowledge. I believed this would be an opportunity for them to reflect about the world they are into, their contexts, reality and experiences, recollecting professional performances.

In this phase, I intensified my search for participants and seven teachers were interested in taking part. They had experience in teaching in regular schools varying from 9 to 20 years and also teaching private lessons. To identify their needs I revisited the questionnaire from the respondents and applied it. The answers revealed that they needed to write mainly e-mails, letters and accounts in English, to teach their students how to write e-mails and curriculums, and they expected a course that would deal with e-mails, formal and informal letters and curriculum. Thus, the recurrent types of texts mentioned by the respondents, the participants and the official documents were: e-mails, formal and informal letters, accounts and curriculum.

Based on this information, the *real learning situation* proposed was *the search for a job* that would take the students to different steps and the production of a series of types of texts. By reading job advertisements and getting interested in one of the positions offered, they would need to elaborate and send an email demonstrating their interest and asking for further information. This message would be answered by the employer asking for a cover letter and a curriculum so that they could take part in the selection process. This would be followed by a request of a testimonial talking about their experiences and future expectations would be required. Thus, the teachers would be asked to produce texts that are part of their professional and/or personal context, having contact, researching and producing the types of texts they deal with in the classroom with their students, meeting their needs and the ones expressed in the official documents.

This phase took many months and required constant contact with the questionnaires, documents, theoretical constructs and lots of research. At its end, a general draft of the course had been designed, some materials have been devised but neither of them was concluded. The support material that was partially elaborated dealt with: planning, drafting, revising and editing; writing; diction, tone and style; paragraphs and sentences; peer evaluation; formal and informal letters and e-mails. A list of sites that would help the teachers in relation to grammatical aspects as well as online dictionaries was created.

Phase 3
In the third phase there was the implementation of the online writing course. I counted with the participation of four teachers[6]. By exploring the platform and

taking decisions, little by little, I delineated the design in an attempt to highlight an articulation, as well as a non linearity and non fragmentation of knowledge, establishing the rhizomatic relation, suggested by Freire (2009, p. 2). I was dealing with inter-related systems, considering that the part was in the whole and vice versa, though some emphasis, in the *moments*, was given to different aspects through readings, searches, tasks and discussions.

Along the *moments* the teachers produced texts, explored the support materials, did research and the assigned tasks individually or in groups, using the following tools from Moodle: tasks, dialogue, forum, glossary and diary. There was also space for evaluation of their development, learning and the course. Together, we created room for the topics and we did not see them as isolated bits that did not articulate. Their voices were fundamental for me to take decisions about the design and also to evaluate the choices made - weaving a complex net.

The course had five *moments*. The first *moment* lasted 10 days and was entitled *Getting Started*. Its objective was to familiarize participants with the platform, introduce themselves, get to know the colleagues, do an individual reflection about writing in English and in Portuguese, have contact with support material and tasks about *What is writing?* and *Planning, drafting, revising and editing*, and a group reflection on the *moment*. This was the only *moment* that when implemented suffered no modifications, remaining as planned. The second *moment* was entitled *Course Objectives and Learning Situation* and lasted 32 days. Its aim was to present and discuss the course objectives, provide support material and tasks related to *Diction, tone & style* and *Paragraphs* , introduce the *real learning situation (the search for a job)* that would lead to the production of an e-mail for the employer. At this *moment*, after having contact with the students, the course began, in fact, to be co-constructed and changes started to occur in the design made prior to its beginning. The third *moment* took 15 days and was named *Applying for a job*. In this moment there was feedback regarding the e-mail task, contact with support material and task related to *Sentences* and *Formal and Informal Letters*. Proceeding with the *real learning situation,* participants were asked to write a cover letter and a curriculum and there was also an individual reflection on writing and the course. This *moment* has been designed while it was happening, with support materials being re-designed to better suit the course and the teachers' needs, tasks defined and elaborated. And this was the design and implementation procedure from this *moment* on. In the fourth *moment*, *Testimonials and feedback,* which lasted 25 days, participants had contact with support material and tasks related to *Conjunctions* and *Responding to writing,* had the chance to experiment peer correction and reflect on this experience, feedback on their written productions and continuing with the *real learning situation*, the focus was on *Testimonials.*The fifth and last *moment* took 15 days and was called *Reflecting on the lived experience*. Its focus was a reflection on the lived experience: to learn how to write in English, how to teach writing and its applicability to their personal and professional lives.

Along the *moments* new definitions occurred in relation to the platform and the way materials, tasks, headings and information were displayed. I faced difficulties of practical nature and I needed some time to adjust to this new environment - especially during the first *moments* because many things that had been planned on paper needed to be adjusted, and others seemed to work differently in the new environment.

Final Considerations

Based on the theory of complexity and the principles proposed by Morin (2005, 2006), the objective was to design and implement an online writing course that would offer the participants the chance to construct knowledge, weaving and establishing relations among the content of the course, their teaching practice, lives, interests, needs, expectations, school and society, considering their needs and expectations and writing as a process in light of the complexity theory. The aim was to offer a course of a complex nature, based on an adaptation of the Methodology of Projects (Behrens, 2006), having as a start point a real situation (Freire, 2009), in which the participants and I (the teacher, researcher and designer), could deal with challenges; uncertainties; order/disorder/organization; the unpredictable, undetermined, and contradictions; including the participants, and with pertinent knowledge construction by means of interaction and a collaborative work (Morin, 2005, p. 63-70; 2006; 2008, p. 196-273).

Meeting the complex vision, the design was not completely done beforehand, being co-constructed, exploring connections, relations, integrations, when living the process. Thus, to me, the term *design*, in the context of this paper and research, corresponds to what is commonly denominated design and re-design. Also, after this experience, I build a new vision of course design – a complex vision – and I believe it to be a contribution, once there is not a theoretical model to the design of a complex course. I see this model as a starting point and not as a fixed pattern to the creation of complex courses, as this rigid and pre-defined vision would go against the complexity principles. Then, the design of a complex course has inter-related and continuous phases of needs' identification, design, design and implementation, reflection and self-reflection and this movement allows the weave of nets. Under this perspective, I do not deal with design or implementation, but with design and implementation, once at certain moments design and implementation are complementary experiences, not being able to detach or separate them.

Notes

1 – I translated all in-text citations.

2 – In an earlier stage of his work Morin (2005, p. 95-96; 2006, p. 74-77) proposed seven principles: *systemic or organizational, hologrammatic, retroactive circuit* or *feedback, recursive circuit, self-eco-organization, dialogical and reintroduction of the cognoscente subject.* However, lately, the author refers only to three of the principles: *the dialogical, the recursive and the hologrammatic,* as they embrace the others. Therefore, this is not a reduction or simplification of the principles but,

according to me, a search for integration, a weave, meeting the complexity ideas (D'Esposito, 2012).

3- These respondents had experience in teaching in regular schools varying from 3 to 20 years. Four of them also experienced teaching in language institutes and seven used to teach private classes. Another important aspect to mention is that, initially, I expected to have at least 20 questionnaires but it was not easy to find respondents.

4- In this paper I will not discuss the nomenclature variation *types of text* or *textual genre*, due to the fact that I do not find prototypical examples, what would require a description of the genres used to identify their structures, what would distance me from the core of this paper. Besides that, according to Paltridge (2002, p. 73), the terms *genre* and *type of text* are frequently used in an interchangeable way, although there is not a universal consensus that they refer to the same aspect of a text.

5- Moodle (Modular Object - Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a free virtual learning environment (http://moodle.org).

6- At the beginning I counted with 7 participants but 2 of them never accessed the platform and 1 accessed it but did not participate. All 3 were excluded from the course.

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