DESIGNING AN ONLINE COURSE ON THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE & THE ETHNIC-RACIAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the experience lived by a coordinator/researcher when designing a free online course for a group of basic school educators who teach English and Spanish as foreign languages and ethnic-racial relations in a private school in São Paulo (Brazil). This online course used free Internet tools and it was designed according to the school's educational project, the needs expressed by teachers working in this context, and the Brazilian official documents, in light of the complexity perspective. This paper presents and discusses the coordinator/researcher reflections during the online course design process.

Introduction: The Design of a Dream

To begin with, it is important to highlight the need of teaching and learning foreign languages and ethnic-racial relations. Since addressing this aspect is not part of the curriculum, it is not compulsory or even considered by many institutions. As I am a black female teacher of English[1] as a foreign language in my country, working as a teacher in a public school and as a coordinator of Modern Languages in a private institution[2], I have, throughout the years, tried to implement the Law 10639/2003[3] in my teaching practice. Previously to the law, I had already included ethnic-racial issues in my annual planning and worked with them in my classes, considering the school's context and my life history, as well as my students.

Even though there is a national law to guarantee the inclusion of ethno-racial relation issues in the curriculum, and some teachers, like me, who have been developing some school projects, in the scope of public schools, it has been much more difficult to implement changes whereas, in some private institutions, this may occur in a less conflicting way especially when we want to count on the massive support and interests of colleagues. However, some examples surprise us positively. I refer to a private school colleague who, some time ago, emphasized that I had so much experience on the African continent that she wondered if that knowledge could be shared with the other teachers, as it would be enriching for all of them.

Since then, this speech intrigued me and it has been echoing in my mind and in the ones of some other colleagues' as well. We eventually talked about it and last year the issue was reconsidered, but again, due to time constraints, it was not possible to develop any project related to that particular issue at that moment. However, this year, the group started talking about the course, and

came to the conclusion that it would be harder for everyone to have the opportunity to take it in person because of the workload of the teachers and the coordinator. According to the Brazilian teaching context, it would be more difficult for the group to take a face-to-face course because of the workload of teachers (working at various schools on the same day and spending time shifting), large distances, and difficulty in finding a single time for everyone to come together. The decision for an online course was then taken, and also considering that technology is part of the teachers' and the coordinator/researcher's lives.

We had the possibility to offer an online course relying on some free Internet tools and resources. The group was excited and commented on some learning environments we have already experienced. The Moodle platform had emerged as a possibility. Initially, not to lose the enthusiasm of the group until we got the platform settled, we decided to have e-mail communications and started checking the possibility of having a private page on Facebook.

The Online Course Design: The Underlying Theory

The online course designed by the coordinator/researcher for a group of basic school educators was grounded on the school educational project, the needs expressed by a group of teachers who work in that specific context, and the Brazilian official documents, i.e., *Orientações Curriculares – Expectativas de Aprendizagem para a Educação Étnico-Racial* (SME-SP, 2008)[4], and Lei 10.639/03, in the light of the Complexity Theory, proposed by Morin (2005, 2008) among others, as presented below.

Complexity

According to Morin (2009), our school system teaches us to separate the objects of its context and isolate the subjects. This separation and fragmentation of the disciplines is incapable of capturing what is woven together, that is, what is complex. Regarding the course reported in this article, the idea is to weave together the teaching and learning of a Modern Foreign Language and ethnic-racial relations. Therefore, there is the need for a general and diverse culture that is capable of stimulating the employment of general intelligence that Morin (2009) entitles *spirit alive*. According to D´Esposito (2010):

> The theory of complexity is the result of a collection of new conceptions, visions, discoveries and reflections (Morin, 2006, p. 77), 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 detains and transmits knowledge). (p.1-2)

Taking into account this new thinking it is important to discuss the relevance of the context of the teaching and learning of foreign languages and its dialogue with ethno-racial relations in the virtual environment. It is also

relevant to consider the difficulties of knowledge construction/reconstruction that welcomes this new thinking and offering the opportunity to demystify beliefs in relation to the teaching and learning of foreign languages and the fragmentation in the school environment.

Teachers' Formation on the Learning -Teaching of Languages

The foundation of the teaching and learning of languages and teachers' formation in Brazil and abroad is supported by Celani (2000, 2003, 2004, 2008, and 2009), Dewey (1938/2001), and the official documents that regulate education in Brazil. The proposal for the ethno-racial relations is grounded in Munanga (2001) and the regulations provided by the *Ministério da Educação e Cultura* (MEC, Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005).

Celani (2000) is a name of reference when we mention the teaching of English as a foreign language in Brazil. According to this author's historical review, it was in 1809 that foreign languages (French and English) became part of the curriculum of our schools. By then, the teaching of foreign languages had a very important role in the curriculum and also a considerable status in society in general. This position was maintained until 1961 when there was an overhaul of the curriculum. In 1998, a new document, entitled *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* (PCN, *National Curricular Parameters*) reinforces that the learning of foreign languages is a right of the population. In this document, the teaching of foreign languages is seen as a function of schools within their teaching context and education. This document brought also enough contradictions and reflections on the topic, being considered as a great and powerful thread of practical classroom (Silva, 2006). According to (MEC), it was planned considering and respecting regions, cultural and political diversities that exist in the country and, on the other hand, considering the need of creating references to the national common education process all over the country (Brazil, 1998a).

One of the concerns of the MEC was to promulgate the overall PCN (Brazil, 1998b) and PCN for High School (Brazil, 1999/2004), and, due to this, it was trying to transform the educational system of basic education. The school is seen as part of the training of the young Brazilians, who need to face adulthood with more security. The curriculum designed for high school authorities is based in skills, so it provides a curriculum that connects to various contexts of the students' lives. An excerpt from the introductory presentation of PCN-EM (Brazil, 1999, p.11) is noteworthy because it affirms that there is decontextualized teaching, compartmentalized and based on the accumulation of information. On the contrary, we seek to give meaning to school knowledge, through contextualization; avoid compartmentalization, by interdisciplinary; and encourage reasoning and ability to learn.

Schools need to provide a space for social interaction in which people cooperate, build their identity, preserving their specificities and respecting cultural pluralism (Munanga, 2001), and not isolated by high walls, fences and padlocks, which are often viewed as foreign to the community. According to Freire (1970/2003), only an individual who is out of context is able to distance

him/herself, to admire this context in order to transform it through his/her own creation, pledging. As Dewey (1934/2001) pointed out:

> Schools can be, literally, builders of the new social order. However, the schools, of course, participate, and not specifically ideally in the construction of the social order of the future as they are combining with this or that movement within the existing social forces. (p.11)

A collective memory of the history of black community interests the entire community of students and teachers, because this memory belongs to all Brazilians, which are the result of all ethnic segments. As Munanga (2001) emphasized, "If our society is plural, ethnic and cultural, since the beginning of its invention by the colonial force, we can only build it democratically respecting the diversity of our people" (p.12). Awareness of the ethnic-racial theme and a series of joint actions in teachers' education (Celani, 2004) can certainly contribute to the strengthening of a more plural education (Munanga, 2001), whereas educating for equality is indispensable and an urgent task for the (re) construction of thought (Morin, 2009) and the society of the future.

However, when entering the classroom – whether a private or public school - and facing the social context, most of the time teachers face a reality that is very different from what they have experienced in college/university. The teaching and learning of foreign languages requires new ways of teachers' education, so that they can become learners in the classroom in order to meet the social function needs of foreign languages in Brazil (Celani, 2009). Teachers of English in their undergraduate training should develop values and beliefs about what it is to teach and learn a foreign language because, as Celani (2003) pointed out, when dealing with the formation of teachers, mainly during large educational reforms, the structures change without changing the culture, with non satisfactory results. According to the author, other mechanisms and other new structures are required for the flourishing of new cultures.

Thus, judging from the current situation, it may seem that the limitation on the efforts of teachers to promote a new social order in which the ideal of equality and freedom of individuals is a fact and not a fiction overlaps deeply relative to the element of possibility of achieving this goal. However, this is not the case, even before the major setbacks for the immediate realization of such a possibility. The reason lies in the fact that the current status quo is in a state of fluidity. There is no status quo if this expression is understood as something stable and constant (Dewey, 1934/2001. Therefore, in-service training can help teachers and coordinators to face the difficulties which are present in their pedagogical practice and that the teaching and learning of a foreign language is mostly seen by teachers/educators as social practice. Thus, the teaching of foreign language with the ethnic-racial bias may be an opportunity for the school community to rethink the world in different perspectives. Moreover, we might think about the use of new technologies to help us face these difficulties.

The Online Course: Purpose, Context and Participants

The educational process of the school focus in this article is one and multiple, i.e., objectives, guidelines and actions take into account the details of its Political and Pedagogical Project (PPP), which expresses not only the legal requirements of the educational system, but also the needs, expectations and goals of the educational institution. Thus, the teachers, in order to plan their annual school work, need to consider their individual interests, taking the PPP into account. However, the teachers need to go in search of formation (individually or collectively) to consolidate knowledge that can be constructed over in service formation, in order to consolidate the actions mentioned in the previous paragraph about the teachers' education. The balance between maintenance of established partnerships can be interlaced together by all participants.

This free online course aims at discussing the (re)construction of knowledge on and about language, mediated by the online environment, formally and informally constituted. Considering that knowledge is constructed in a network, subjected to multiple relations, the course aims also at discussing the online experience lived by a group of teachers and the school coordination of the foreign language area on issues on the teaching and learning of foreign languages and ethno–racial relations. The objective is to consider: the educational practices, the teachers and the coordinator role, and the connections, contrasts, ambiguities that may emerge -- all this, throughout the online interactions, and taking into account the school context that the participants are inserted into..

The participants[5] will be a group of teachers of English and of Spanish who work in the basic education[6] and the coordinator/researcher of the school. This proposal will be part of an ongoing school project that will offer a free online course addressing the role of media mediators, social networking interfaces and reflection on teaching practice. The course load comprises 30 hours, distributed all over two months; the course and its design is based on the complex paradigm.

The online environment offers the participants the facility to take part in the course at their own time as well as provides them with the opportunity to become familiar with new technologies – considering that nowadays, in a big city like São Paulo, many people have access to different tools such as IPhone, IPad, Facebook, blogs, SMS, Skype, etc. Although some teachers had suggested Moodle for our learning environment, my preference is to expose them to various tools that we can get on the Web, and that they can use with their students later on. In so doing, they will learn not only how to use each one of them, but also they may have insights on how to use them in learning activities in their classes. Therefore, these factors influenced the decision for offering a distance-learning course (and not a face–to-face one) centred on free tools available on the Web.

Reflecting on a possible English language course based on the complex paradigm, it is necessary to elicit the theoretical guiding principles that should permeate its design. I think any course in any field that craves complexity

must consist of such principles, which I will discuss below. For Morin (2008,p. 73 - 74) complexity is based on three principles: the dialogic, recursive and hologrammatic. The dialogic principle emphasizes dialogue between opposites. Some meanings may be constructed from their opposites. In this case, they are complementary and not contradictory; a dialogue emerges between them in such a way that in order to understand one, it is necessary to mention the other. The coexistence between order and disorder, for instance, is necessary for the maintenance of a system.

The second principle, the recursive principle, is probably the central point of complexity. It is related to the resumption of something previous to advance. It is also related to the systemic and circular vision that emphasizes that each of the parts of a system backlashes on the other and feeds it, showing us how everything is interconnected, and woven together. It is the understanding that learning is not linear, but recursive - to resume something previously seen otherwise rebuilding progress.

The third principle is the hologrammatic, which is related to the part-whole relationship, that is, the whole is composed of parts and these parts contain the whole. According to Morin (2009), "not only the part is in the whole, but the whole is in the part" (p.74).

When thinking about the design of a free online course that aims at establishing a dialogue between foreign languages and ethno-racial relations, we must understand that all parts of are intertwined and that a simple change in one part generates a disorder in the system, and, in turn if these parts are reorganized, they will form a new whole. We teachers need to understand that disorder is a natural constituent in any system, and the whole system self-organizes again.

Taking these arguments into account for the development of this course, I designed a preliminary draft composed of interconnected steps. Although it may change ─ and it certainly will ─ during the execution of the course, due to the participants' needs, anxieties, ambiguities, contradictions, and/or other requirements, the initial design is made up of the following steps:

- **Step 1:** Content delineation; literature research; initial contacts with the teachers and the school for the course; syllabus preparation.
- **Step 2**: Content refinement; syllabus and principles established by the course coordinator shared and discussed with participants presenting (focusing on reflections about the teaching-learning of foreign language and ethno-racial relations); theoretical support: readings and discussions of texts; exposure to resources and tools (platform, email, Skype, msn).
- **Step 3:** Implementation of the online course (exchange of files, texts and email; exploratory stage; theoretical discussions in groups; implementation of didactic situations; observation, notes, reports on teachers' practice and coordination); process evaluation of the participants and the course itself; discussion and initial drafting of the proposed joint education plan for 2014 involving the theme.

- **Step 4**: Course evaluation; follow ups for a next term course; further readings (if the group considers it relevant).

Reflections on the Course Proposal and Design

This proposal can bring something positive to the formation of foreign language teachers, due to the fact that the teaching and learning of English and Spanish is highly necessary to Brazilian citizens, so they can be part of the discursive interactions in society as a subject of discourse. This is also of interest to teachers/educators because they are new challenges to face.

At the end of this article, I still have many unanswered questions: I still ask myself if it would be possible, how it could be done, how it would be to create an online free course using a platform and the kind of contributions it would bring to the teachers' practice and how the teaching and learning would dialogue with the topics concerning the ethno-racial relations. A complex design would not be easy. As asserted by Celani (2008), a particularly complex task due to the ambivalence of the process continuously in change, requires me to understand what happens, the system, the context, the school and its functioning as a living system. As postulated by Morin (2009), any education reform should, first of all, begin with the reform of educators, and this reform begins with a reform of thought.

Notes

1. In my Masters research, I noticed that some students were surprised by the fact that I was a teacher of English. An example would be a quote from a student who in one class of an evening adult course said: "Oh, teacher, I've never seen a black teacher lecturing English." This interesting observation was a guiding thread for my questionings about my ethnical dash, making a difference in my classes from that moment on.

2. This private school has students from the working middle class. Most students attend school from Kindergarten until High School. Parents and/or caretakers trust the institutions, which is small (around 600 students), knows students by their names, and takes good care of their children who cannot leave school without permission. Parents believe the teachers have a good education and that their children are safe at school.

3. Law 10.639/2003 establishes that the teaching of Afro-Brazilians' history and culture should be compulsory, taught in all and every elementary and secondary, public and private educational institution.

4. *Orientações Curriculares – Expectativas de Aprendizagem para a Educação Étnico-Racial*, i.e., Curricular Orientation   Learning Expectations to Ethnic-Racial Education, corresponds to a document that aims at promoting reflection and discussion about what students need to learn in each field of knowledge, as well as guiding schools to select and organize contents from Kindergarten to High School.

5. The participants are three teachers of English, one teacher of Spanish, one teacher of English and Spanish and a coordinator/researcher, a master in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies. Two teachers teach English in Child Education and Elementary school, level 1; another is a teacher of English at Elementary school, level II and the other two teach in English and Spanish in High school.

6. The Brazilian school system is composed of: *educação infantil* (child education), *ensino fundamental* (elementary school), *ensino médio* (high school) and *educação superior* (Higher Education). *Educação infantil* is offered in day care units, for children from 0 to 3, and pre-schools, for children from four to six. O *ensino fundamental*, has the objective the formation of the citizen. It lasts eight years and it is compulsory and free. High school lasts three years (you can start it at the age of fourteen).

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