

EXAMINING AN ONLINE MINI-COURSE ON WRITING IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper articulates theoretical aspects that support the design and implementation of a 10-hour-online-mini-course on writing in English as a foreign language, in the Moodle platform, designed for graduate and post-graduate students and offered at a seminar for language teachers and students, in São Paulo (Brazil). It contextualizes and presents the mini-course and shares reflections on the lived experience from the perspective of the teacher/designer and the participants. The aim is to reflect on the lived experience and the impact generated, aiming at providing elements to (re) consider in relation to the design and implementation of online mini-courses.

Introduction

The number of online courses being offered increases every day, and it is also reflected in the organization of events in the Applied Linguistics area. Symposiums, colloquiums, plenary sessions, for example, that used to occur in face-to-face contexts are now also happening in the virtual or in hybrid environments. The experience I present here was part of *III Jornada sobre Ensino-Aprendizagem de Línguas em Ambientes Virtuais*¹ (*III Encounter on the teaching-learning of Languages in Virtual Environments*), a hybrid event offered by Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas (Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences), at Universidade de São Paulo, in Brazil, in October 2012. In this *Jornada*, besides the face-to-face component, participants had the opportunity to join in online mini-courses that focused on the learning and teaching of foreign languages – Portuguese, English, French and Spanish – offered in the online environments MOODLE or EDMODO².

This work focuses on the mini-course on writing in English as a foreign language to graduate and post-graduate students attending this *Jornada*, and it aims at presenting a reflection on its design and implementation. Bearing in mind this objective, in this paper the teacher/researcher presents the mini-course context and objectives, articulates the theoretical constructs that support this paper and the mini-course, comments on the mini-course design and implementation (providing some examples), and presents some reflections on the experience lived and the impact generated.

The Mini-Course Proposal and Conception

The online mini-course entitled *Escrevendo e pensando sobre a prática escrita em língua inglesa* (*Writing and thinking about the writing practice in English*) was part of *III Jornada sobre Ensino-Aprendizagem de Línguas em Ambientes Virtuais* (*III Encounter on the teaching-learning of Languages in Virtual*

Environments). The mini-course load comprised 10 hours, distributed during two days. It was planned for the Moodle platform, and it was designed considering a maximum of twenty participants: graduate and post-graduate language students. There was no prerequisite in terms of participants' language competence and a minimum of two accesses was required per day. Its main inter-connected objectives were: (1) provide participants with a writing situation in English as a foreign language in the online environment, and (2) reflect on the learning teaching experience lived.

As for its conception, the aim was a design and an implementation that would allow knowledge construction, establishing a connection between the course content and the professional and/or personal lives of the participants. The goal was a mini-course in which the participants and the teacher/researcher would live and face the upcoming challenges, uncertainties, risks; deal with the unpredictable and the relation order/disorder; include the observer, his emotions and feelings; and consider its context, searching for pertinent knowledge, and do collaborative work (Morin, 2006, 2006b, 2008).

The Theoretical Constructs

Complexity, complex online design, and writing in English as a second language are the three main aspects that dialogue and underlie the mini-course conception and, consequently, this research and paper. Thus, in this section, I present, discuss and articulate these constructs, focusing on the design and implementation of the online mini-course on writing in English as a second language to graduate and post-graduate language students.

Complexity

Even though people generally associate the term complexity to something difficult, complicated, or elaborate, Morin (2006, p. 89; 2008, p. 190) points out that it derives from the Latin word *complexus* and it means, "What is weaved together."³ Thus, the complex vision substitutes the thought that isolates and reduces for one that unites, so the physical world is perceived not as a collection of fixed or isolated parts arranged in a certain order but a net of relations, of interrelated events.

With this view, knowledge is perceived and co-produced/co-constructed via our dialogue with the world (Morin, 2008), requiring interaction with the object and the physical and social environments (Moraes, 2006). Knowledge construction is, then, related to non-linear or pre-determined enrichments, generated when we live processes and explore connections, relations, and integrations. Therefore, complexity values and is concerned with processes, dialogue, interactions and weaves, and it aims at non-fragmentized, linear, detached, individualized, reductionist or compartmentalized knowledge or curricula (Behrens & Oliari, 2007; Moraes, 2006, 2008). Experiences are valued and considered and the human beings are seen as constituted by reasoning, sensations, emotions, feelings, and intuitions (Morin 2006; Moraes, 2006; Behrens & Oliari, 2007; Mariotti, 2007).

Three interdependent principles help us think about complexity (Morin, 2006, 2006b). The *recursive principle* establishes a process in which products and effects are at the same time producers and the cause of what is being produced. This recursion ruptures with the linear idea of cause/effect, product/producer, once everything produced is connected to what produces it in a self-constitutive, self-organized and self-productive cycle. The *hologrammatic principle* understands that not only the part is in the whole, but also the whole is inscribed into the part. Thus, it is possible to enrich the parts by the whole and vice versa. The *dialogical principle* conceives a dialogue among aspects that have antagonistic relations. It allows us to maintain the existing duality, and to assume, rationally, the inseparable that exists in notions that are complementary and not contradictory, allowing us to understand them.

Aiming at the design of an online mini-course of English that could meet complexity and the aspects mentioned above, it was essential to consider instructional design theory and reflect on a complex instructional design.

Complex Instructional Design

Instructional design is an intentional and systematic action that involves planning, development and application of methods, techniques, activities, materials, events and products in didactic situations (Filatro, 2003, 2008). Based on the ADDIE model⁴, which involves the phases of **analysis**, **design**, **development**, **implementation** and **evaluation**, Filatro (2003) proposes a *contextualized instructional design* in which these phases would occur recursively along the process, not involving any degree of absolute prediction or prescription. Some aspects from complexity are contemplated in this proposal, but it cannot be considered a complex one because all the design (as well as the activities and materials) is expected to be pre-established beforehand.

Complex design should not be pre-established but co-constructed by exploring connections, relations, and integrations when living the process. It is composed by interrelated and continuous phases of needs' identification, design, design and implementation, and reflection, in a permanent movement that allows a weave of nets. Under this perspective, design is not detached from implementation, once they occur recursively in interdependent processes, in a hologrammatic and dialogical way. Thus, design and implementation do not exist as separate phases (implementation being a result of the design phase), but design *and* implementation as interconnected, complementary, and inseparable experiences. In a complex design and implementation model the term *design*, then, corresponds to what is commonly named in the literature design and re-design (D'Esposito, 2012a,b).

The Methodology of Projects (Behrens, 2006) proposal goes in this direction. It promotes an educational activity in which situations/problems that learners might face are presented to them, leading to the search for answers and learning with commitment, critical vision and ethics, without memorization. Inter-connected phases are proposed (Behrens, 2006): (1) project presentation and discussion; (2) problem statement - considering learners experiences and

interests; (3) contextualization - delineates the investigation and alerts on how to look for information; (4) theoretical/dialogical classes; (5) individual research and production (6) group discussion and production; (7) final production - application of the individual and group productions; and (8) learning and project evaluation.

The Methodology of Projects (Behrens, 2006) goes in this direction. It aims at providing students an educational activity that would lead to learning with commitment, critical vision, ethics, and without memorization by presenting them with situations/problems they might face. The project would comprise interconnected phases (Behrens, 2006): (1) project presentation and discussion; (2) problem statement - considering learners experiences and interests; (3) contextualization - delineates the investigation and alerts on how to look for information; (4) theoretical/dialogical classes; (5) individual research and production (6) group discussion and production; (7) final production - application of the individual and group productions; and (8) learning and project evaluation.

Considering and reflecting upon the Methodology of Projects, D'Esposito (2012) proposed *real learning situations* as a way to work in a complex perspective. They refer to situations that are, were, or would be part of the learner's professional or personal lives that lead to discussion, encourage the search for new information, generate individual and group research and production (counting on their theoretical-methodological-experiential knowledge), and generate reflection on the world they are engaged into recalling and considering professional performances and life experiences. In *real learning situations* the teacher and learners deal with challenges, uncertainties, contradictions, the unpredictable and the undetermined as they come along, with pertinent knowledge being co-constructed through interactions via collaborative work (Morin, 2006, 2006b; 2008).

Focusing on the design of a complex online mini-course of writing practice in English as a second language it was also important to consider aspects in the writing area as follows.

Writing

I see writing as a self-negotiation and discovery of meaning(s) process that comprehends generation, formulation and refinement of ideas; commitment; consciousness about a reader; and revision (Zamel, 1987). During the writing process, learners should be able to organize information, develop fluency, gain control over the vocabulary and use more complex structures, acquire maturity in relation to the style, and reflect on its purpose and audience (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). At the end of the process, they should feel that the piece of writing belongs to them, also relating the classroom practice to their real world (Maybin, 1996). It is important to the learner to count on his previous experiences, making himself understood using a variety of formal aspects by transferring abilities and strategies from his mother tongue (Friedlanger, 1996).

Procedures such as cooperative learning, consciousness about the audience, language and the need for editing, as well as the support of a teacher who observes and plays the role of a facilitator, model, reader and a sustainer who interferes in the work, structuring the writing and helping the writer understand it are important aspects in the process (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Cox 1994).

Although the literature mentioned relates to writing in English as a mother tongue, it provides relevant aspects to be considered in relation to writing in English as a foreign language.

The Online Mini-Course Design & Implementation

The aim of the mini-course *Escrevendo e pensando sobre a prática escrita em língua inglesa (Writing and thinking about the writing practice in English)* was to provide a *real learning situation* close to the participants' reality that could foster the presentation of possibilities and/or proposals retrieving their practical, tacit or theoretical knowledge, allowing the articulation of theory and practice, the exchange of experience and reflection on the practices. Activities that would lead to some investigation; autonomous and critical knowledge production; readings; individual and group investigation (that would allow participants to access various learning strategies, and, mainly, to learn how to learn, not simply memorizing information); search for answers with commitment and critical vision; exchange of information and opinions; production, and formative evaluation of the mini-course.

Bearing in mind the mini-course objectives, the teacher/researcher opted to work with general aspects related to the writing process and a specific type of text⁵: an application letter. This decision was based on her previous research in which she investigated the needs expressed by English teachers from regular schools in Brazil, a Brazilian official document (*Proposta Curricular do Estado de São Paulo para a disciplina de Língua Estrangeira Moderna, São Paulo, 2008*), and the materials devised for classrooms use (*Cadernos, São Paulo, 2008a,b*) by Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo (Secretary of Education of São Paulo State). Therefore, the writing situation was based on something that was, is, or would be, part of the participants' professional or personal lives, their needs and the official documents.

The mini-course was organized around four topics: getting to know my colleagues and what they think of writing, writing, time to write, and reflecting on the experience. As I expected participants to access the platform at least twice a day, I planned to display a topic in the morning and another in the afternoon. As highlighted in the previous section, complex courses cannot be totally pre-defined as they should be co-constructed by the participants whenever exploring connections, relations, and integrations, during the course. Therefore, the design *and* implementation of the mini-course occurred almost simultaneously. Even though a general plan had been made and the support material devised beforehand, they were thoroughly revised in order to attend to the participants' needs and expectations, and also considering the experience being lived. So, the course I present below was not completely

displayed on the platform before its start but designed and implemented (weaved) during the two days.

Nine people enrolled in the mini-course, but only seven actually accessed the platform: three of them were not from São Paulo State, and were finishing a Master in the Education area; one was a Bachelor in Languages and had a specialization in the area; one had a Master degree in Languages and was doing a Doctorate in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies; one was a Bachelor in Languages; and two were Languages graduate students (in the second year). Only the two undergraduates did not have experience in the teaching of English as a second language in regular schools and/or language institutes.

The first topic entitled *Getting to know my colleagues and what they think of writing*, focused on creating a sense of group, getting to know the participants, their needs and their opinion on writing. The participants were asked to fill in their profile and share with the group information about themselves; to answer a questionnaire designed by the teacher that had the objective to know about their formation, their relation to writing, the types of texts they need to write for personally and/or professionally, how they see writing, and their experiences with online courses; and to answer a survey on *Writing is... because. ...* This was the only topic completely devised and inserted in the platform before its start. All seven participants engaged in the activities proposed.

In the second topic, *Writing*, I invited participants to think about the writing process. I started by proposing to them a forum that raised the question “What does the writing practice involve?” After it, participants were asked to read the support material entitled *Writing, what is it?*⁷ and write a *diary*. The objective of the diary activity was for participants to reflect about writing based on the reading material they had access to, their personal experiences and the forum. Seven participants took part in the forum and accessed the support material but only four of them completed the diary.

On the second day, the third topic, *Time to write*, presented participants with a *real learning situation* and focused on the production of an application letter. It began by raising questions about application letters (what they are, what they should contain, how they should be organized) and asking participants to research about the topic, share information and together construct knowledge about it in a *wiki*. Then, the teacher provided some support material on *Formal Letters*, which was followed by a task, a dialogue, in which, collaboratively, participants were supposed to create a checklist on the aspects they should remember when writing an application letter. To sum up this topic, participants were given a series of real job advertisements links, were asked to select one of their interests and write an application letter to submit. The task was divided in three parts - plan, write, and edit – and participants counted on teachers’ feedback though out it. Four participants accessed the support material, but only three engaged in the activities proposed.

The fourth and last topic, *Reflecting on the experience*, proposed a *diary*, in which the teacher asked participants to reflect on writing and the online mini-course experience (support materials, activities, tools, platform, etc.). Only one participant took part in this topic.

By the end of the second day, I noticed, once more, that some participants accessed the activities but did not do them – especially the writing task – and the mini-course ended up with two participants.

A Few Considerations

Looking back at the mini-course design and implementation experience and reflecting on it, I believe that the opportunity to offer online mini-courses on events like *Jornada* can be very appealing. and, with time, people can get used to it and profit more from these new learning opportunities. However, special attention must be taken when offering them.

One of the challenges I faced, as the teacher/designer of this mini-course was to think about it without knowing in advance who the participants would be. After proposing the course I had no elements to consider for its design, and when the mini-course started, I had only two days to design and implement it. Therefore, I tend to believe that having some information about the participants beforehand, for a two-day-online-mini-course that aims at attending the participants' needs, with interaction, co-construction of knowledge, research, exchange of ideas and production, would be important.

Online courses tend to offer asynchronous activities, and this characteristic is one of the reasons people get interested in this sort of courses. The possibility of accessing platforms from various places (not necessarily the formal school environment), at different times of the day is appealing to some people. However, these aspects may be an issue for teachers when designing and implementing a two-day-mini-course, especially if they expect the participants' interaction for doing the tasks. As I would like participants to have the chance to experience various interfaces (wiki, forum, dialogue, diary, etc) and to finish the course with some theoretical support and experiential knowledge, I personally became very anxious when I noticed that participants had not accessed the platform and completed the activities. Maybe this would not be an issue if my aim was not to offer a complex course, but in this particular case, I expected and counted on participants to reconsider the initial plan, and design and implement new activities and support material.

I tend to believe that time constraints were one of the main issues for this online mini-course and for the drop out rate. This aspect was called to my attention as well as the event organizers' and, in the face-to-face day of the *Jornada*, they announced that the mini-courses would be on air for another couple of days, in order for participants to have the chance to catch up. Unfortunately, the whole mini-course on writing had already been inserted in the platform, so the activities that required individual research, exchange of ideas for future exposure to support materials and production did not make much sense. Therefore, according to me, this could have been a de-motivating factor for participants.

I believe I could offer participants the chance to construct knowledge and to work with it in a non-isolated way, counting on experiences, allowing a weave and establishing connections and relations among the content of the mini-course, the participants' lives and needs, and the context they are part of. It was an attempt to offer mutual, non-linear or pre-determined enrichments through relations, interactions and connections. I also tend to believe participants could see writing as a process and notice the mini-course not as a series of fragmented topics but inter-connected aspects contemplating the principles proposed by Morin (2006, 2006b).

Notes

1. The *Jornada* offers to its participants the chance to reflect and exchange experiences on the learning and teaching in virtual environments, creating room for discussions on teachers' formation and the role of teachers and students for this context. The first session, which was face-to-face, focused on the presentation of prestigious researchers. The second one was also face-to-face, and offered a conference, workshops, communications and posters. The third session's format was hybrid: face to-face conferences, tables and communications, and communications and mini-courses in the virtual environment.
2. MOODLE and EDMODO are free virtual learning environments. For information access: <http://moodle.org> or www.edmodo.com
3. I have translated the in-text citations present in this paper.
4. The ADDIE Model involves: (1) analysis - identification of needs, technological infrastructure and media; objectives definition, and students' profile delineation; (2) design – establishment of curricula, team and schedule; selection of pedagogical and technological strategies; (3) development - pedagogical and technological definitions; production and adaptation of material, and teachers and tutors formation; (4) implementation - didactic situation and application of the proposal; (5) evaluation - analysis of the course, system, technological and pedagogical structures.
5. I will not discuss or emphasize in this paper the different nomenclatures: type of texts or genre. According to Paltridge (2002) the terms *genre* and *text type* are frequently used interchangeably.
6. Moodle and Edmodo were the available platforms. I decided on Moodle due to my previous experience with it.
7. All support material has been devised and adapted from a material previously designed by D'Esposito (2010).

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