

TUTORING FORUMS IN AN ONLINE COURSE ON THE TEACHING-LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

This paper examines the experience lived by tutors in the forums of an online course on the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language for technical schools teachers in São Paulo. The theoretical background supporting this research relates to the theory of thought formation, the epistemology of practice, online teaching and tutoring. The methodology used is the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach and written texts that contemplate the experience, and that were created by the tutors via questionnaire and narrative. These texts were interpreted and reveal the themes that characterize the experience, providing us aspects to reflect on online tutoring and online tutors' formation courses.

Introduction

Distance education introduced new learning-teaching practices, and due to this there has been the need to revisit some roles, such as the one played by tutors. The aim of this paper is to examine the experience lived by tutors in the forums of an online course on the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language for Escola Técnica Estadual (ETEC - *Technical State School*) and Faculdade Tecnológica (FATEC – *Technological Faculty*) English teachers, in São Paulo (Brazil), in order to reflect on and rethink online tutoring at forums and tutors' formation courses. It focuses on a self-study online course that takes place in the Moodle platform and is comprised of self-study online activities, related follow-up readings, and online discussions, counting those with the supervision of tutors who are available to mediate the discussions and help participants with specific content matters, also giving them technical support.

In the first part of the paper the theoretical background that gives support to this research and is related to theory of thought formation, the epistemology of practice, online teaching, and tutoring will be presented. In the second part the focus will be the methodological aspects: the methodology used to investigate the nature and better understand the experience lived, the context, the instruments used to generate texts¹ and their application, the online course and the participants. Then, the tutoring experience will be interpreted and reflections regarding the tutors' practice will be shared, aiming at providing readers with aspects to reflect on online tutoring at forums and some aspects to be considered when designing and implementing tutors' formation courses.

The Theoretical Constructs

As this work aims at examining the nature of the experience lived by tutors in the forums of an online course on the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language at technical schools, in São Paulo (Brazil), the main constructs that support this investigation are Dewey's theory of thought formation (1959, 1971), Schön's epistemology of practice (1991, 1992, 2000), and studies on online teaching (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Horton, 2000; Fullmer-Umari, 2000; and others) and tutoring (Tagg & Dickinson, 1995; Bischoff, 2000; Seoae-Pardo & Garcia-Peñalvo, 2006; De Marchi et al., 2011; Bezerra & Carvalho, 2011, among others).

Thought Formation and Epistemology of Practice

Dewey (1971) highlighted the need to establish a relationship among our experiences and education. He introduced the notion of an experiential continuum that supposes that each experience modifies who lives it, indicating that all experiences contribute to the formation of emotional and intellectual attitudes, sensibility, and our perception of the world. Therefore, Dewey contended, teachers should know the students and the content to be worked, to select activities that could generate a social organization allowing participants to contribute and to share information and challenging them to think.

According to Dewey (1971), to think is an impulse, a search for connection, and without it there is no intellectual growth and space for reconstruction.

However, Dewey (1959) posited reflective thinking is the best type, and it requires mental examination of topics leading to a conclusion. Thus, it is an operation of search, research and investigation, aiming at solving a doubt, answering a question or clarifying an uncertainty.

Schön (1992) revisited Dewey's work and described the elements that comprise reflective thinking: knowledge into action, reflection in action, and reflection about the action. The element knowledge into action is the one constructed and revealed in our daily practice (sometimes we call it instinct or intuition). Reflection in action occurs during the action and is connected to our spontaneous actions, and reflection about the action happens afterwards.

Thus, teachers should guide, motivate intellectual and mental activity, organize the topics and content, check the students' progress, verify their attitudes and habits (Dewey, 1959), try to understand the surprises and reflect on actions, breaking with routines, and experimenting continuously (Schön, 2000).

Online Teaching

According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), learning in the online environment is an active process in which knowledge construction and learning occur by experimentation, manipulation and increase in abilities. Focusing on and referring to the systematic development of content, D'Esposito (2010, 2012, 2013) highlighted the works of Driscoll (1998), Berge, Collins, and Dougherty (2000), Abbey (2000), Fullmer-Umari (2000), and Horton (2000) that reinforce the importance of identifying the participants' needs, which lead to the definition of the objectives, the phases that make up the course, and the

tools to be used. As Driscoll pointed out, besides meeting the identified needs, the course should be interactive and non linear, use easy interfaces, have structured lessons, make effective use of the multimedia, pay attention to technological and educational details, and create an atmosphere that values the participants.

It is also important to focus on the commitment, responsibility and participation expected; the objectives and deadlines; the rules, procedures, and rhythm; and the amount of time set for the development of the activities and feedback (Horton, 2000). Special attention should also be given to the length of the course; the number of participants; the sequencing and structuring of the objectives; the environment, resources and equipment available, and how well teachers, tutors and students deal with them; the implicit learning theories and methods; the clarity and quality of the materials selected, created and displayed; the content and validity of the instructions; the implementation and follow up processes; and the evaluation of the phases to assure that the objectives are reached, allowing the chance to revise the course (Driscoll, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Berge et al., 2000; Abbey, 2000; Fullmer-Umari, 2000; Horton, 2000).

Online Tutoring

An online course depends on the constant observation, action and performance of tutors (De Marchi, Streit, Araújo, & Diedrich, 2011) who are key figures (Salmon, 2000) in the teaching-learning process, and, even if tutoring has some specific features, it maintains the essence of the educational teaching action (Bezerra & Carvalho, 2011).

The tutor should know and interact with the contents and the material available, make didactic interventions when necessary, be available to stimulate participants' autonomy, monitor the participants' work by providing support on the course, clarify doubts and questions related to the content, follow the students in the learning process, problematize, establish and instigate dialogue with and among the participants, involve them in the learning process, motivate and encourage, stimulate critical thinking and research capability, take part in the discussions, help to solve doubts or difficulties related to the use of technology in a short period of time, evaluate the participants' progress, promote collaborative work and learning by doing, and contribute to students' autonomy so that knowledge construction takes place to ensure the achievement of the goals (De Marchi et al., 2011; Bezerra & Carvalho, 2011; Seoae-Pardo & Garcia-Peñalvo, 2006). Besides that, the sense of presence of a tutor seems to be crucial so that students do not feel isolated or alone (Tagg & Dickinson, 1995; Bischoff, 2000).

Therefore, the tutor's role might be viewed from the perspective of different interconnected spheres held by the same person whose presence in the learning is fundamental. The academic role is specific for every single knowledge area, and must be held by a person with scientific competences. The other roles relate to cross-competences and skills (psycho-pedagogical, personal, technological, methodological, didactical, social, communicational). Tutors' presence on every step in the learning activity is fundamental to adapt

learning strategies to learning styles, solve problems, and consolidate a solid but flexible didactical environment (Seoae-Pardo & Garcia-Peñalvo, 2006). The aspects mentioned make us wonder about the minimum qualifications and competences required to teach in the online environment as well as what should comprise online tutors' formation courses.

Methodology

In this section there will be a presentation of the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990; Freire, 2007, 2008, 2010), which has been the methodology used to investigate the nature of the experience lived, the online course, its context, its participants and tutors, and the instruments used for text generation and their application.

The Hermeneutic-phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology aims at a better understanding of lived experiences (phenomena), without defining or characterizing them beforehand (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen, the experiences are the starting point for us to get to their essence, that is, the elements/structures that express/give them identity. However, as any description of a phenomenon can lead us to various interpretations², van Manen proposed the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which associates phenomenology and hermeneutics, so that hermeneutics helps on the interpretation of the written texts that reflect the lived experiences, allowing us to better visualize, revisit and deepen our understanding. The aim is not to reach an absolute truth but a possible interpretation for the written texts. Thus, a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation involves the description and the textualization of the experiences lived, considering their possible interpretations. However, according to Freire (2007, 2008, 2010) van Manen's approach prioritizes phenomenology so the author proposes the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (with a hyphen), giving the same emphasis to both philosophies.

Van Manen (1990) proposed a thematization process that allows us to get to the essence of the phenomena. It includes a series of readings of the written texts and the identification of units of meaning, that is, excerpts that call our attention once they reveal or contain any particular meaning in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. This identification take us to the refinement and re-signification phases in which we confront, confirm, re-incorporate, reformulate, and discard units until we get to the themes³ that represent the essence of the phenomenon (the elements that express them and the structure that gives them identity) that derive from the abstraction resulting from the interpretation process and the dialogue of the written texts. This intense reading movement allows us to elicit, establish relations and inter-relations among the units of meaning, generating the validity cycle that validates our discoveries about the phenomenon.

The Course

The online course is part of a continuous formation programme designed by a non-profitable private language institution, a private university and a state centre of technological formation in São Paulo that aims at the language and

academic-professional development of English teachers at technical schools (ETEC and FATEC). It includes:

1. A face-to-face specialization course
2. An online specialization course
3. Workshops
4. Language courses (if teachers do not have a B1 level at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages⁴)
5. An online course on the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language

The first three are organized and provided by the private university and the other two by the non-profit private language institution.

The online course on the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language is composed of self-study online packs distributed along thirteen weeks: twelve weeks of activities, plus one week, the first in the course, for familiarization with the environment. It aims at surfacing relevant and applicable pedagogical aspects of the English language teacher's classroom practice, stimulating discussions and reflection amongst participants. The packs focus on andragogy; classroom management; drills and receptive skills; error correction; error correction and feedback; pronunciation; eliciting; language practice – speaking; feedback; warmth and discipline; and dealing with language.

The course takes place in the Moodle environment, and each week a pack comprised of self-study online activities, followed by related follow-up readings and online discussion forums, is released. To accomplish the tasks the teachers are required to: (a) work through the self-study online activities; (b) do the follow-up Internet tasks (readings and videos), and (c) write at least two reflective weekly posts per topic on the discussion forums. In these forums, which are the focus of this investigation, the participants count on the supervision of a tutor who is available to mediate the discussions and also help them with specific content and technical support. A technical support team was available to help the tutors.

It is estimated that participants need to dedicate from two to four hours per week to accomplish the tasks, and assessment happens throughout the course. In order to pass (or not pass – a grade is not given) participants join the forums (the content of at least two posts in each forum is considered) and complete all the self-study packs (the number of attempts and corresponding scores are registered in the platform).

The Course Participants and Tutors

The online course had ninety-eight participants enrolled, fifty-five from ETEC and forty-three from FATEC. Their ages varied, and thirteen of them were male. All of them had a degree in English, and they were currently teaching English at the technical schools. They had teaching experiences that varied from five to twenty years. Fourteen participants (14.3%) cancelled their enrollment before the course started. Seventeen (17.3%) dropped out - seven

due to difficulty accessing the tool, nine because of lack of time and one for personal problems. Sixty seven (68.4%) finished the course, and just one of them did not pass.

Participants were divided into four groups for the discussion forums and each group was allocated to a tutor, who I describe below:

- *Laura* has a bachelor's degree in English and a specialization in management and leadership. She has been working as an English teacher and the academic coordinator of a language institute for about thirty-five years, also teaching courses on teacher's formation. She has taken a course subsidized by Cambridge University on the formation of e-consultants.
- *Mark* has a bachelor's degree in English, a master's degree and a doctorate in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies. He has been working as an English teacher for thirty years and on the online environment for almost ten. His experience on this environment comes from his doctorate research, readings and other experimentations.
- *Sam* has a bachelor's degree in English, a master's degree and a doctorate in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies. He has been working as an English teacher for twenty-five years and in the online environment for almost eight years, but he did not receive any formation for it.
- *Helen* has a bachelor's degree in English, a master's degree and a doctorate in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies. She has been working as an English teacher for twenty years in different contexts, also with language teachers' formation. She started working on the online environment six years ago due to her doctorate and did not receive specific formation for it.

Laura's group had twenty participants (sixteen finished the course); Mark's group had twenty-two participants (eighteen finished the course); Sam's group had twenty (fourteen finished the course); and Helen's group totaled twenty two (nineteen finished the course).

The Instruments

A questionnaire was designed and sent to the tutors via email at the end of the course. It contained open questions that addressed their formation and professional experience (including formation to be an online tutor and teaching online): if they believed that specific formation to work on the online environment was necessary; how they saw the online tutor's role and what they believed comprised their work; and what they considered to be the expectations of online students and tutors. They were also asked to write a narrative describing, examining and reflecting on their online tutoring experience at the forums and how it contributed to their formation and future online practices considering the aspects related to thought formation, the epistemology of practice, online teaching and tutoring mentioned in the theoretical constructs that support this study and paper. The aim of both instruments was to generate texts that captured the tutoring experiences lived

on this online course so that they could be interpreted, revealing the essence of this phenomenon.

Apart from that, all material made available in the Moodle platform, mainly the posts of all the forums, were used for additional support.

Results and Interpretation

The eleven forums occurred as planned, and due to participants' delays each forum remained on air for a fortnight. Table 1 illustrates the number of posts in each group inserted by the tutors and the total number of posts in each forum (number of tutors' posts /total number of posts in the forum).

Table 1

Number of Posts per Forum

Tutor	Forum										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Laura	30/78	10/36	8/33	8/27	9/28	7/25	6/24	10/30	8/26	8/30	8/24
Mark	14/50	20/58	19/53	25/61	25/61	25/66	22/56	23/62	31/74	14/37	30/70
Sam	17/48	16/39	14/37	12/30	9/28	9/25	8/25	10/24	11/26	10/28	8/20
Helen	17/56	12/44	12/42	17/48	13/44	18/47	16/46	8/35	16/42	8/37	8/29

As we can see in Table 1, Mark and Sam inserted more posts into the forums. However, in many of the posts, they simply thanked students for their contributions, to involve, motivate and encourage their participation. It is not always clear in their posts if they can follow the learning process, problematizing, establishing and instigating dialogue with and among the participants, stimulating critical thinking and research. Therefore, we tend to believe that they do not encourage reflective thinking, that is, the operation of search, research and investigation, aiming at solving a doubt, answering a question or clarifying an uncertainty (Dewey, 1959, 1971). On the other hand, Laura and Helen's posts correlate and summarize the participants' contributions as well as questioning them to clarify certain aspects or for further information.

The interpretation of the texts generated via questionnaire and narrative that present the tutoring experiences lived by the four tutors in the forums of the online course were interpreted following the thematization process proposed by van Manen (1990) and revealed five themes. One of the themes that emerged from the texts and that concerned the tutors is their *knowledge* in relation to the *content* being dealt with in the course as well as the *technology* in order to provide students with the necessary support to do the activities required. *Feedback* is another theme revealed, and it is related to the *content*, *problems*, and *timing*. Tutors are concerned with the quality of the feedback given to the participants in relation to *content* and the concepts that are being addressed and discussed in the course, and that are present in the discussion forums, that is, they question themselves about the impact and the quality of the comments and questions they ask. They are also concerned with the

feedback related to the *problems* participants face with the platform and the tools being used, and the *timing*, because tutors believe that it is important not to keep participants waiting for any sort of reply for long. Their *role* is another theme revealed in the texts. Tutors see themselves as mediators, facilitators, motivators, questioners, managers, supervisors and caretakers that establish the rules and routines and encourage the participants to: do the packs and the activities proposed, join in the discussion forums and not to give up due to content or technical problems. This theme leads to the other two: *interaction* and *empowerment*. Tutors are aware that *interaction* with the content, the material, the other participants and the tutor is one of the key elements for the success of forums and online courses so that participants do not feel isolated or lonely and drop out, and that it is their responsibility to encourage participants to interact. And all this leads to the tutors' concern in relation to the participants' *empowerment* once they need to engage in the discussions, be autonomous and responsible for their own learning process, problematizing, establishing relations, dialoguing with the colleagues and the tutor.

Comments and Perspectives

The themes revealed in the interpretation that examine the experience lived by tutors in the forums of the online course on the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language at ETEC and for FATEC English teachers, in São Paulo, Brazil reinforce the idea that the online tutor is a key figure (Salmon, 2000), and that tutoring maintains the essence of the educational teaching action (Bezerra & Carvalho, 2011). The tutors are concerned with the aspects mentioned by De Marchi et al. (2011), Bezerra and Carvalho (2011), and Seoae-Pardo & Garcia-Peñalvo (2006) concerning knowledge about the content and technology participants' autonomy, monitoring, providing support, answering questions and doubts and motivating. However, it is not easy for some tutors to problematize, establish and instigate dialogue with and among the participants, involve them in the learning process, stimulate critical thinking and research, and promote collaborative work and learning by doing. This leaves us room for further investigation on these aspects and elements to reflect on in relation to what should be addressed and discussed in tutors' formation courses.

It is also clear that the tutors are concerned with the experience being lived because they are aware that they modify all the people involved, affecting their subsequent experiences, and contributing to the formation of emotional and intellectual attitudes (Dewey, 1971) and their perception of online courses. We also notice in the themes the presence of the different interconnected spheres held by the tutor whose presence in the learning is fundamental to solve problems and consolidate a solid and flexible didactical environment and also the cross-competences and skills (psycho-pedagogical, personal, technological, methodological, didactical, social, communicational) that are required (Seoae-Pardo & Garcia-Peñalvo, 2006).

However, I could not notice concerns in relation to their formation that I believe to be crucial for their online teaching practices once online teaching has some specificities and requires some abilities, competences and skills that

differ from the face-to-face classroom. Only one of them received specific formation, while the others relied on their previous attempts and experiences in the online environment, feelings and intuition. As Schön (1992) mentioned knowledge into action (sometimes called instinct or intuition) is constructed and revealed in our daily practice. However, specific formation on the area is important so that teachers are aware of the theoretical constructs that support their practice, allowing them to have a reflective thinking and practice. Thus, there is no doubt that a tutor for the forums of this online course needs not only a degree in English, specific qualifications to work with teacher's formation on the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language but also to be familiar with the online environment and its corresponding needs and challenges.

To conclude, even though this research focuses on the online tutoring experience lived by a limited number of tutors in forum spaces, it is believed that it raises relevant aspects to be considered due to the fact that the themes presented here, that result from the interpretation process, which reflect the tutoring experience lived by these four tutors, bring to light the challenges and concerns other online tutors might have in forum spaces. We believe this reinforces the need to reflect on and rethink what comprises the online tutoring practice and the aspects to be considered during the design and implementation of tutors' formation courses.

Notes

1. Under this methodological perspective we refer to text generation and interpretation instead of data collection and analysis.
2. According to van Manen (1990, p. 25) any description is an interpretation.
3. In van Manen's proposal (1990) themes are characterized by short sentences while in Freire's (2008, 2010) they are nouns once this word category does not allow further refinements or re-significations.
4. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* provides the basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines; the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. It is available in 39 languages,, and it describes foreign language proficiency at 6 levels, providing the basis for the recognition of language qualifications and facilitating educational and occupational mobility. For further information access http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp

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