NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: THE PERSISTENCE OF STRUCTURALIST APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE IN ONLINE DISTANCE COURSES

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Abstract

New technologies are considered nowadays an integrated part of social, school and classroom practices. The present paper studies a long distance course offered by the government of the state of São Paulo to high-school students enrolled in public schools. Our objective is to show that school practices, in this case, become regulation and regulatory practices. Moreover, although the students have the know-how, they rarely access the platform and a small number of students end up concluding the course and getting the diploma.

Introduction

We are living nowadays in what Kalantzis and Cope (2012, pg. 34) call "The Third Globalization". The First Globalization was led by the speakers of the "first languages" and the Second by the invention of writing. The Third Globalization, which started in the end of the twentieth century and goes on in the twenty first, brought changes in the information and communication technologies and transformations in the ways meanings are produced and reproduced.

It was in the nineties, that theoreticians such as Lankshear and Knobel started talking about New Literacies. By giving priority to those post-typographical and non-linear literacies that emerged with the digital media, they started articulating theories inside the digital epistemology. This epistemology still sees language as a social practice but recognizes forms of meaning-making that haven't been recognized before and promotes knowledges that are produced with the resources of technological language that hadn't been inserted in the social and educational discussions before.

In other words, the New Literacies expand the notion of language by adopting a new epistemology, the digital epistemology: from the essentially typographic constitution of literacy, New Literacies give priority to new forms of literacy beyond the printed media, turning the notion of language more complex. Instead of a linear text, the text in the digital epistemology presents itself by bringing together and juxtaposing innovative forms of expression, such as texts, images, sounds, graphics, emoticons and hyperlinks that create oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning.

Lankshear and Knobel coined the term performance epistemology to refer to an epistemology that focuses on knowing-doing in the absence of pre-established

models. Paying attention to the new strategies and abilities used in the construction of knowledge in contemporary societies by means of new digital media problematizes the idea of homogeneity.

In the field of language teaching, there is the emergence of a new communicative order (KRESS; STREET; SNYDER), triggered by the development of new technologies of communication and information and characterized by the use of abilities and strategies beyond the use of language as a strictly verbal linguistic code in the meaning making processes of subjects in digitalized societies. Language teaching is much more than just words or grammar structures. It involves an understanding of a complex network of verbal, visual and gestural codes.

Therefore, there are two aspects that need to be considered in the understanding of what "New" means in New Literacies: one focuses on the technical question, characterized by digitalization practices which are central in current times, and the other focuses on the question of ethos, characterized by an ontological rupture insofar as the digital apparatus has affected the subject itself by reconfiguring aspects such as identity, knowledge, language and consequently pedagogy.

New technologies are considered nowadays an integrated part of social, school and classroom practices. However, the challenge is to find ways to put technology in the service of "education" and to "find effective and appropriate ways of using these technologies to help prepare students to participate independently, competently and critically in post-school contexts" as fully participatory citizens (Lankshear; Snyder; Green, 2000, p. 2). Moreover, as Carmen Luke (2000) affirms "change has been so rapid that the rate of technological innovation continuously outstrips the rate of research output on the social, cultural, and educational consequences of electronic and global communication systems" (70).

Objectives

This paper is an attempt to catch up with technological innovation in English Language Teaching and tries to understand if the epistemology behind a Virtual Course on English Language has changed in post modern times or continues to be modern in its essence. We research a long distance course offered by the government of the state of São Paulo to high-school students enrolled in public schools. We show that in spite of the dynamic, entertaining and colorful platform, the course, entrenched in the communicative approach, still viewed language as a structure.

Description of the Platform

My object of research is an educational program launched by the Ministry of education in Brazil. On May 23rd 2011, the Virtual School of Educational Programs of São Paulo State (EVESP) was created by the Ministry of Education under the pedagogical supervision of the Administration of Pedagogical Studies and Norms. The objective of the implementation of this program aims at offering regular, special and capacity building educational programs to attend the needs of

specific groups of people. These educational programs should follow the National Curriculum Guidelines and the rulings of the State Council of Education.

The mission of the project is (1) the use of information and communication technologies in the learning process; (2) the breaking down of geographical barriers; (3) the facilitation of access to education and technology (student and teacher); (4) the dissemination, implementation and consolidation of Distance Education; (5) the incentive for self-learning.

The English course online started in 2012 and was offered to two groups: the first group did the course from March 1st to June 27th and the second group (which I participated in as a tutor) did the course from August 1st to November 28th. The target groups were regular High-School students and students of EJA (Youth and Adult Education), a supplementary education course. The course offered 50000 vacancies. The course has the duration of 80 hours: 8 modules of 10 hours each. The course offered the headset for free and a diploma in the end.

Each group in 2012 had 25000 students and lasted 16 continuous weeks. The activities of each module included: (a) texts, videos and animations; (b) exercises and practices and (c) mini-tests at the end of each module (compulsory to pass the module). At the end of the course there is a final evaluation.

The course focuses on the development of different abilities: (a) listening and reading comprehension: reading and understanding of simple texts and discourses, getting the main ideas and details in contextualized texts or discourses (narratives, monologues, dialogues) and (b) oral skills: communicate in the social and professional areas, dealing with everyday situations such as giving and receiving simple instructions on the phone, talking about on the job activities and experiences by using proper vocabulary.

As it concerns the lexical field, the syllabus works with the following contexts: vocabulary that refers to countries, nationalities, family relations, sports, national and international eating habits, positions and professions, vocabulary related to work, housing and building lines, personal talents and abilities, national and international commemorative days, temporal expressions, quantifiers, monetary expressions, idiomatic expressions, colors, clothes and shoes, commercial and service facilities, environmental and sustainability issues, nutrition and health as well as moral issues.

As it concerns grammatical structures, the student should be able to use adjectives, connectives, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, interrogative forms, comparative and superlative, simple and composed verb tenses, conditional sentences (first and second type), modal verbs and *there to be*.

As it concerns communicative functions, the students should be able to introduce themselves and introduce others, make invitations, accept and refuse invitations,

make suggestions, express obligation, permission, likes and preferences, intentions and plans, opinions as well as make descriptions and narrations.

The platform, created with BrainHoney, an interactive online tool developed to expand the classroom and its capabilities, is called AVA (Ambiente Virtual de Aprendizagem or Virtual Environment for Learning). AVA is a customized, entertaining, dynamic, colorful and gamified platform. A character follows the student through the course. There is content presentation, animations, audio and videos. There are evaluative and non-evaluative exercises, mini-tests and games.

According to EVESP the course puts emphasis on speaking. There are many pronunciation exercises, such as the one shown in Figure 1. The videos also present different accents and the course makes reference to International events such as the World Cup and the Olympic games. There is a preoccupation with the insertion of the student in the job market. There is also a lot of every day vocabulary with real situations portrayed in videos.
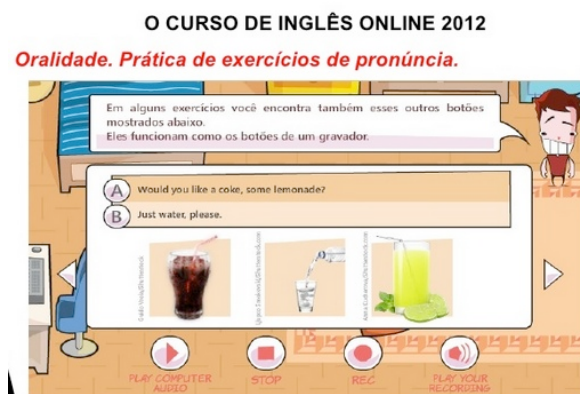

Figure 1

Module 1 is divided in five scenes: *At the airport, Picking someone at the airport, Looking for someone, At the hotel*, and *Checking into a hotel*. There are activities related to the videos such as listening and speaking, recordings, grammar and vocabulary exercises.

Module 2 is also divided in five scenes: *Moving around town, Getting to know the hotel, Exploring the city, Riding the subway* and *Going places*.

Module 3 is divided in five scenes: *Room Service, Maintenance service, At the Museum ticket counter, Visiting the museum* and *At the travel agency.* In this module there is a *quiz* of module 2 that gives the opportunity to the student to make a review of the previous module.

Module 4 is divided in five scenes: *A table for two, Ordering appetizers, Ordering the main course, At the craft fair* and *At the shoe store.* And there is again a *quiz* that refers to module 3.

In Module 5 the student gets acquainted with costumes and celebrations typical of some countries, such as China and Japan. Moreover, the student learns how to speak about the weather and on the phone. There is again a *Quiz* that is a review of module 4 and the student can do it at any moment during module 5.

In Module 6, the students learn how to prepare their curriculum in English, how to behave at a job interview and how to talk about the different professions. Moreover, they are presented with expressions used to talk about health problems and they can also review grammatical structures, such as *prepositions* and *word forms* (word formation).

In Module 7, the students are introduced to regional and international cultural events. They learn how to describe someone physically and, since the World Cup is near, the students are presented with some terms related to football.

In Module 8, there is the *Final Test* of the content of the course and the game *The Missing Star*.

The course is free and its main advantage is (according to its designers) the mobility it offers the youngsters since they can access the platform from any computer and any time convenient to them and perform the tasks. The aims of the course are to encourage the students to develop their linguistic abilities and therefore increase their possibilities of insertion in the job market.

During the course, the students are accompanied by teachers-tutors, in person (nowadays) and online, that help them perform their activities and clear their doubts.

There are different channels of communication in the platform. To communicate with the coordinator, the tutors can access the forum of pedagogical support, mail or messages and to communicate with the students the tutor can use the forum of each module, mail or chat (only implemented at the end of the course offered to the second group).

The tutor opens each module with a welcoming message. The language used is friendly and cordial:

> Dear Student (s)
> Welcome to the English Course Online. As your teacher-tutor, it's very rewarding to be with you on this journey.
> In this module you'll experience various contexts where English is used that will help you interact with future foreign visitors in Brazil.
> Module 1 is divided in five scenes: *At the airport, Picking someone at the airport, Looking for someone, At the hotel*, and *Checking into a hotel*.
> There are activities related to the videos such as listening and speaking, recordings, grammar and vocabulary exercises. With activities such as

videos, voice recordings, listening comprehension exercises, grammar and vocabulary, you'll develop fluency in English.
If you still have doubts how to study in this virtual environment, it's worth reviewing module 0, when you open the page of the course.

Good studies
Hugs
the tutor[1]

According to the guidelines given to the tutors in the guide for Module 1, "the tutor can adapt the welcoming message, but should remember to keep the same pattern of language that meets educational standards. Avoid using slang, emoticons, internet slang (chatspeak) and informal language".[2]

There is always a message encouraging students to participate in the forum. The tutors also open the forum by writing their own answer to the topic being discussed. On the second and ninth day after opening each module, the tutor sends a message called reminder to encourage the students' participation. On the seventh and eleventh day after the opening of each module, the tutor sends messages to the students by using the "follow-up" tool. Each student gets a personal message according to their performance. Each module lasts 15 days.

There is a side bar where the student can find a dictionary, Blackboard, Talk to the Tutor, Section Map and Save an Image (Figure 2 and 3).
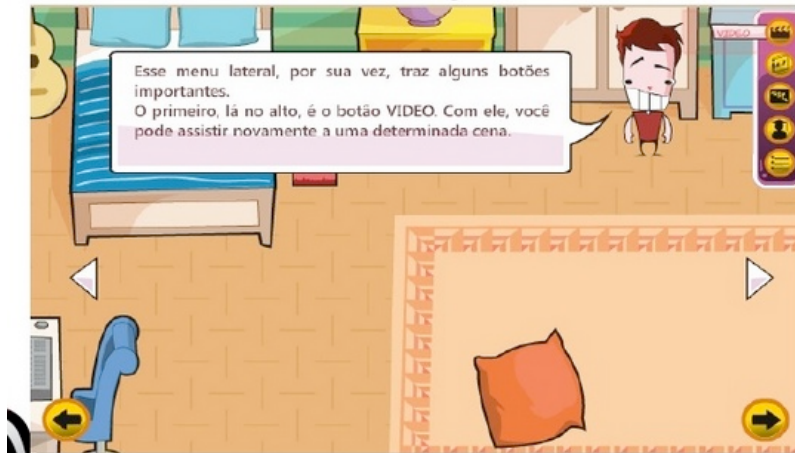

Figure 2

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[1] our translation
[2] our translation
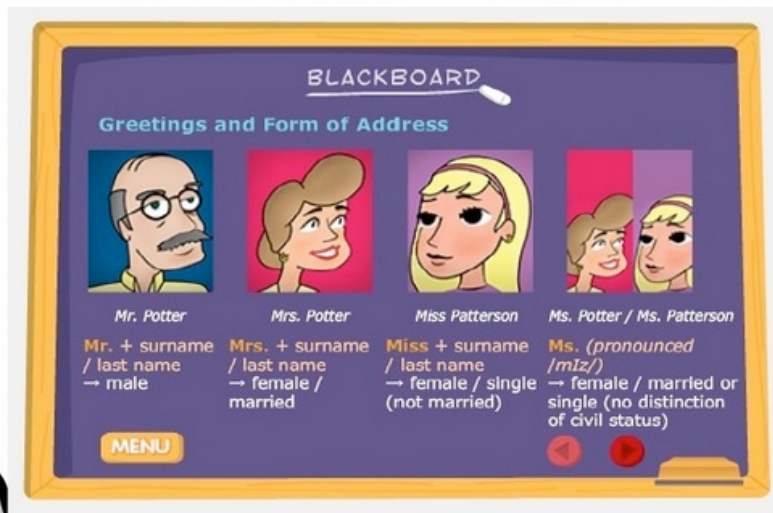
Barra Lateral: Blackboard

Figure 3

The exercises are multimodal and use a variety of ways to make the student understand, learn and reproduce the vocabulary and structures taught in each video (Figures 4, 5 and 6)
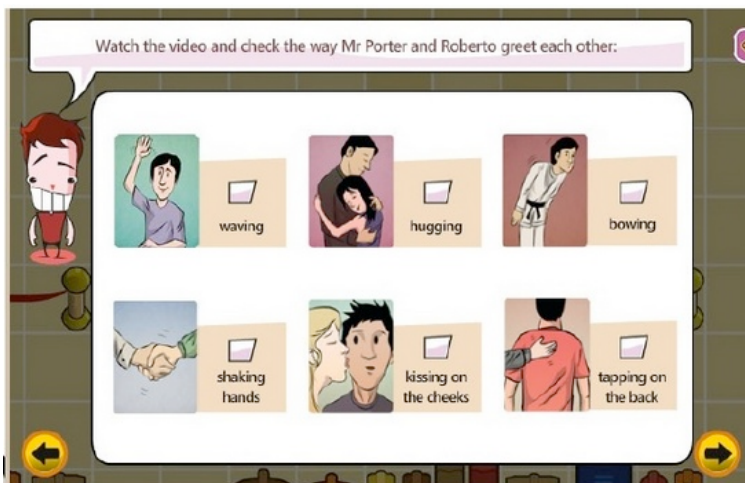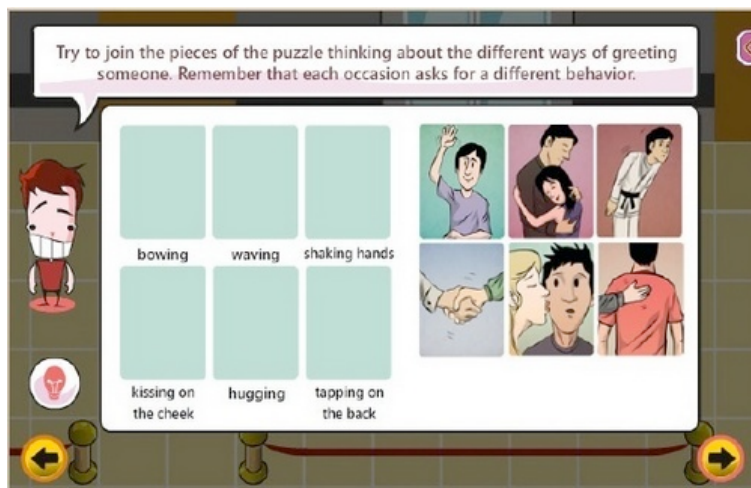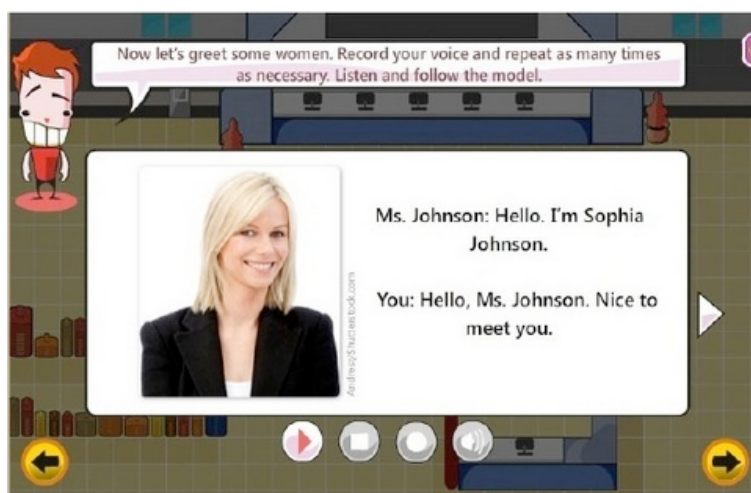

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Final Words

It can be seen from the analysis above that the site of the platform can be described but not the *locus* where the students take the course. In terms of socio-economic status, physical characteristics of the site where the learning process takes place, size and demographics are unknown to us when we participate at a long-distance course. However, knowledge about the public educational system in Brazil leads us to make some assumptions in relation to these issues.

According to other tutors that work at the schools where the course takes place, most of the students have to do the course at school where Internet connection or computers are not always available. Some students register in the course because they want to get the headset. Some students can take the course at home but the computer they use is shared with other people and thus, isn't always available. Moreover, the Internet connection at home isn't trustworthy. Therefore, we can

see that there are technical aspects of fragility, such as difficulties accessing the Internet. As Luke (2000) defines it, "technological diffusion in the social sphere proceeds unevenly, and is mediated by a range of interlocking socio-demographic and cultural factors that variously make possible and limit access and participation" (74). The "social spread and uses of technologies are never uniform and predictable because of structural inequalities of access and participation, and various choices of resistance to technologies and the lifestyles and ideologies that accompany them." (LUKE, 2000, 75).

The distinctive features of the course that are identified, described and analyzed in this paper show that the activities were characteristically school-like and were addressing certain social classes and qualifying the students for certain jobs, such as waiters, taxi drivers or vendors. Moreover, communicative and structuralist approaches to language emerge from the dialogues and exercises that make up the course.

We agree with Lankshear and Knobel (2011) who identify

> recurring features of new technology-mediated literacy practices in classrooms. These reflect a marked tendency to perpetuate the old, rather than to engage with and refine or re-invent the new. Many researchers have identified the "old wine in new bottles" syndrome, whereby longstanding school literacy routines have a new technology tacked on here or there, without in any way changing the substance of the practice.

Furthermore, technologizing learning practices stumble in a teaching workforce that is un(der)prepared for the challenge and curriculum-oriented educational ends that conceive new technologies as "mere" tools to be adapted to familiar routines (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011, 191). It can't be denied that any software teaches the user-learner certain cognitive-mapping strategies. We, as educators need to become familiar with the many issues at stake in the "information revolution" so that we know how and where we must intervene with positive and critical strategies for teaching, and how to make the best and judicious use of the many multimedia resources available" (LUKE, 2000, 71).

Moreover, the different contexts taught in the course point to an implied objective: to train those students to become the work force that will serve the tourists who will be visiting Brazil for the two big events: the World Cup (2014) and the Olympics (2016). School practices, in this case, become regulation and regulatory practices, fact which brings us back to Foucauldian power relations that, as he claims, are less something imposed on us than something dispersed through the network of relationships which make up society.

By working inside the digital epistemology, Lankshear and Knobel coined the term performance epistemology, an epistemology of knowing-doing in the

absence of pre-established models. We observe that although the students have the know-how, they rarely access the platform and a small number of students end up concluding the course and getting the diploma.

This study shows us that digital communication has the objective to spread education and reach students of more un(der)privileged social classes in Brazil. However, outdated approaches to the study of languages prevail in the New Media. Can New Literacies adopt new epistemologies and approaches to language teaching? This is the challenge that educational programs such as EVESP will have to take on.

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