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**Developing Language Teachers in  
Distance Learning Courses**

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## **Developing Language Teachers in Distance Learning Courses**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to discuss how Distance Education can contribute to the development of language teachers, taking also into consideration the development of "broader literacies". We analyze the course Teachers' Links-PUCSP/COGEAE, totally run in a virtual platform (Moodle), of which we are teachers and designers. The course aims at the improvement of English teachers and focusing on critical reflection, teacher education and language learning. The analysis of one of the course modules, sought to find out how we are contributing to the development of teachers for a performance that takes into account multiliteracies and the use of new technologies of communication and interaction to promote the joint construction of knowledge. Data analysis are supported by the researches of Rojo (2012, 2013), Lemke (2010), Luke (2006), Signorini & Cavalcanti (2010) and Kress (2006, 2013), among others. The analysis pointed out that the course contributes to teacher development and points out to the need for re-examination of the teaching materials, to develop greater awareness of teachers to the question of "broader literacies" and the use of technology in their teaching activities.

**Keywords:** Distance learning, digital technologies, language teacher's development.

## **Introduction**

As Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Braga (2013), we understand that the concept of educational technology is complex and must involve notions about how knowledge is produced, taking into account the reflections of teachers and students on their learning/teaching productions, which take place precisely through the negotiation of learning goals. Therefore, we believe that educational technology should be defined as the formal use of technologies for the development of an education that disseminates, reports or engages teachers and students in activities with well-defined and theoretically oriented purposes to achieve specific learning goals.

Many educational contexts, including distance education, currently rely on digital technologies. This has been one of the great challenges of educators in all segments of education, which does not fail to reflect the influence of the scientific development and its popularization. The arrival of new and complex tools of various natures entered educational environments requiring educators and students a movement of constant adaptation and improvement of skills for a job that leaves the characteristic of linearity - traditional teaching paradigm - and plunges in a networked knowledge production perspective. This is the context of distance education, driven by the need of social practices mediated by technological tools and the pedagogical mediation developed by professional teachers with new social roles. We believe that we can think of technology as allies, enablers of new learning and that these can be used critically and consciously to achieve specific learning objectives. For this reason, our focus is not technology itself, but what teachers and professionals can do with technology.

Thus, the course we are presenting, totally online, aims to provide conditions for a clear awareness of the teacher about professional development and academic opportunities to improve their performance in English, as well as their capacity for critical reflection on their role in public education and their ability to plan and organize their teaching actions.

Besides that we believe that concerning the issue of new literacies, the virtual is by definition an open sphere for the diversity of social identities, which are present in a world like ours: computerized and globalized. For this reason, we see as crucial to try to understand the challenges of the new literacies enabled by courses online.

The course is run in a virtual platform (Moodle), of which we are teachers and designers in an Education Program for Teachers of English, active since 1999, for teachers throughout the state of São Paulo, Brazil. The Teachers' Links: Reflection and Development for Teachers of English is a refresher course at PUC-SP and has 60 places offered free of charge every six months, funded by Cultura Inglesa, a language institute in Brazil.

For the data analysis of this research were used the categories of multiliteracies proposed by Rojo (2012), namely: promotion of interaction; diversity of media, languages and cultures; and breaking power relations. As an analysis method, a module of the course was selected, and in particular an

activity. Some parts were separated, according to the categories of Rojo (2012), to determine whether the same patterns occurred in the other module activities. The research has the general objective to enable us to perceive the work we do with our students/teachers, trying to identify whether the learning objectives favor a job for multiliteracies and collaborative work trying to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do we promote interaction?
- 2) The course promotes the use of different languages, media and culture?
- 3) Do we allow the breakdown of power relations with the use of machines, internet tools, verbal or non-verbal texts? How?

### **Contextualizing the Problem**

Multiliteracy covers a different working procedure of school literacy. It assumes that the teacher promotes a type of education that includes learning with texts with structural conditions that include verbal and non-verbal languages, with proficiency in developing skills that go far beyond the written and spoken practice. In this context, as in the context of distance education, we think: are we prepared to make students literate in these new formats?

In Brazil, according to Belloni (2003, 2002), among others, many universities, forming teachers have been incorporating technologies to encourage self-learning activities, with programs that generally deny the discussion of use of digital tools, only emphasizing the relationship between devices and users. Thus, a consequence of these practices ends up being the lack of parameters that help the teacher or teacher educators to get prepared to use new technological resources so as to emphasize interactions between participants and collaborative work, with the encouragement of the development of more diversified practices.

Santaella (1992) points out that it would be important to understand the context in which the teacher is inserted, giving space to understand their beliefs when working with new tools, and working with teachers from these beliefs. This action rarely happens because, as researches indicate, teachers, most of the time, are brought to use new tools and new teaching proposals without awareness of the use of technology to improve their practices.

In this sense, it seems necessary to promote research for the situated practices, which refer to educational projects that propose to include the student's culture, gender and designs available to incorporate new practices of literacies. Again, without using technologies to limit and regulate the learning process, but as Jonassen (1999) points out, to create opportunities for the process of ownership of media and make use of them, analyzing the world, accessing information, interpreting and organizing knowledge to communicate to others.

## **Multiliteracy and Collaborative Knowledge Construction**

We can say that the printing press allowed mass literacy and, in a way, privileged the written text in the academic/school context. With the advent of new technologies, we see an opening for a globalized world and an invasion of new forms of communication, mediated by many languages that go beyond the usual verbal language. Thus, a concern with teaching/learning new literacies became part of the concerns of the scholar area. Several researchers, including Rojo (2012), Lemke (2010), Luke (2006), Signorini & Cavalcanti (2010), Kress (2006, 2013), Soares (2002), among others, began to describe and question the challenges of cultural diversity in the contemporary world, permeated with multisemiotic texts. Texts that exist through a variety of languages (photos, videos and graphics, oral verbal or written language and sounds) conveyed by various means. For these authors, this multimodality multissemiótica or multiplicity of languages, as called by Rojo (2012: 27) require multiliteracies, "skills and understanding of practices and production of each (multiliteracies) to meaning making."

In this sense, a number of recent researches in the area of Education and in Applied Linguistics, shows that an analysis of these practices, genres, media and languages is necessary as well as their production and reception, to interpret the social and cultural circulation contexts and the production of these designs and statements, in order to aggregate them to educational contexts, seeking an inclusive pedagogical action, closer to the new realities proposed by the digital world and society "post-industrial" as pointed out by Giddens (2002: 03), in which many individuals are inserted.

It seems that with the advent of globalization, it is necessary to widen our work, stepping up to the cultural and linguistic diversity. Therefore, we believe that the issue of new literacies in learning foreign languages (FL) is a key element as to learn and teach a language. It is necessary to develop openness to different languages and points of view, defined by a diversity of social identities, which are present in a world like ours: computerized and globalized. For this reason, we set out to try to understand the challenges of the new literacies in our course.

According to Rojo (2012) studies are unanimous in pointing out some multiliteracy important features. According to the author, they

- a) are collaborative;
- b) fracture and transgress the established power relations, especially relations of property (machinery, tools, ideas, texts (verbal or otherwise));
- c) are hybrids, *mestizos* of languages, modes, media and culture;
- d) are interactive, at various levels (the interface, the tools in the areas of networking and hypertext tools on social networks.).

To Rojo (2012), one of the features of the new texts is that they are interactive, on several levels. Unlike previous media, for example, the digital

media; by their nature, allow the user to interact on many levels. This feature makes the machines increasingly collaborative. The new communication tools enable collaboration promotion. So, following these features we started observing how multiliteracies were dealt with in the Teachers' Links course, without leaving behind the idea of the use of new technologies of communication and interaction to promote joint construction of knowledge.

In this sense, we also want to show that we believe in the importance of socially constructed language, ideologically marked and enabler of the development of learning. Learning and renegotiation of concepts that are already established, in this view, are a constant and ongoing process in life. So, as we pointed out, the interaction takes on a special character, since it is in relation to other individuals that review, redefine and reorganize their thought. It is through relationships with other social artifacts that the individual develops. It should be noted that by social artifacts we understand any human being or any object of the cultural world around the individual. Learning is then a phenomenon mediated by devices or social artifacts and the symbolic language, which is also socially constructed.

### **The Course – Our Context**

The Teachers' Links - PUCSP/COGEAE is a refresher course with 270 hours, divided into three non-sequential modules of 90 hours each. The course aimed at teachers of English, at academic and personal professional development, focusing on critical reflection and on the role of teacher in teaching/learning and their ability to plan and organize the teaching action.

The course is based on distance learning designed in a virtual platform (Moodle) and seeks to develop the autonomy of the participants to plan lessons of English language for learners in their different learning contexts. The classes promote the reflection on the teaching trajectory, in order to transform the professional context as in an action research context.

The course is sponsored by the Association Cultura Inglesa Sao Paulo which is a partner of PUC-SP in conducting courses for teachers of English since 1995. It offers, each semester, a limited number of scholarships for educators who work in the public state schools of São Paulo (state or municipalities) of Brazil.

#### *Didactic Structure – Four Modules*

- I) Professional Development: reflections on new paths (90 hours): the purpose of this module is to lead the participant to make a reflection on his/her career to open up to other possibilities in professional life. Always with the support of the teacher, the participants will contact teachers from other countries and expand perception about different contexts of action, such as language institutes, regular schools,

graduation courses, and social projects with children or seniors, instrumental teaching English, among other courses.

- II) Development and autonomy in the classroom: reflections on planning teaching materials (90 hours): in this module, the participant learns how to evaluate materials, develop criteria selection using the internet as a source of ideas and organize the materials available according to the level and age of the students. The goal is to develop autonomy to plan lessons that are consistent and appropriate to learning objectives.
- III) Academic development and the classroom: reflections on teaching and learning languages (90 hours): the purpose of the module is to increase the participants' horizons and encourage their academic development, so as to transform their professional context in a research context. Throughout the activities, they develop a research pre-project along the lines of an academic work, using as a basis their own professional work experience.
- IV) Monograph Guidance (10 hours): after completion and approval in the previous three modules, monograph guidance is held under the supervision of a teacher of the course.

#### Module Chosen for Observation and Analysis

The part of the module chosen for analysis was: The Professional Development and Classroom: reflection and new pathways. This part was chosen because it offers the following proposal for teachers/students:

- a) to reflect on their path to open up to other possibilities in their professional life;
- b) to contact with teachers from other countries to broaden the perception of different contexts of activity, such as work in language institutes, in regular schools and/or social projects;
- c) to develop reading and writing practices in English, in the digital environment, through the navigation and use of synchronous and asynchronous tools, linked to the production of individual texts and sets, in order to optimize the opportunities for training and maintenance of learning communities.

#### **Discussing Data**

Seeking to answer the questions already presented we decided to use the categories of Rojo (2012) through the analysis of the discursive materiality of texts produced in the course using the proposed activities.

The example selected for the presentation of this paper is from an activity of the course work unit. The activity is in Unit 1. The teachers/students were invited to read a text in Spanish to be able to practice and discuss the use of different reading strategies. Before reading the text, students were invited to



enter a link on the use of English for specific purposes. Then, the student was asked to read a text on strategic reading and interact with colleagues in a discussion forum to talk about the concepts presented. After reading the text in Spanish, the teachers/students had to return to the forum to share experiences, pointing out the strategies they had used while reading.

Looking at these activities, we began to seek answers to: 1) were we promoting interaction and with whom?; 2) were the activities using different languages, media and cultures; 3) did they make it possible to break the power relations established?

## **Conclusions**

In this analysed universe, with an exploratory look, guided by the categories proposed by Rojo (2012), we realized that the course has strong multiliteracies promotion factors and collaborative learning, if we think of the possibilities open for interaction with peers of the course and off the course. For example, students/teachers had to attend the forum activity where they could talk about the reading strategies they used and talk about the experience of reading a text in a language not known to them. Besides that, they could also write to the author of the text, leaving thus the course boundaries.

In this sense, we realized that the activity also enabled the fracture and transgression of established power relations, because the interaction with the journalist, author of the text, was not an activity proposed by the course and not thought or imagined as possible for us, the material authors. So we realized that the students/teachers took attitudes that were seen as possible in this context and by the medium used. To communicate with the journalist, some even used Spanish, and in this way, they broke with our power relationship because they got in contact with another person that was not a teacher of the course without being instructed to do so.

Also, we could see that the overall activity presented several languages, relying on diversified media such as text and hypertext with images, but it was evident that the activity also presented the prevalence of verbal written language.

The activity also promoted interactivity with various tools such as the computer, the internet, forums and links.

In this way, we also understand that the course opens up the possibility of different culture approaches, as in the case of the text read in Spanish, which is a newspaper of another country and students were asked to read via link to the newspaper. However, with this analysis, we feel that these actions could be more frequent to enable students to contact teachers and students of other courses.

This first analysis ended up surprising us. We did not expect to find the categories proposed by Rojo (2012), so clearly. A very positive aspect since, as teachers and designers collaborators, we had not had the opportunity to look at the course from this perspective.

Despite knowing that the course was designed without the concern for discussing the issue of multiliteracies, we see that the course can be an enabling environment for activities that promote multiliteracies.

These reflections can be interesting elements to continue this research and to review the course material, given that we can include these issues as part of teacher development programmes. We have noticed that we do not ask teachers to reflect about these issues nor to think about them in relation to their practices.

All in all, we feel that the complexity found by educators in virtual learning environments widens considering the fact that many of these professionals graduated in a previous paradigm to the use of technology as a tool for collaborative learning. Regarding this, we emphasize the importance of discussions that bring to light recurring problems in this current context, providing educators with interlocutions that allow them to understand their own role as guiders in the virtual learning environment, and the role to be developed by students as active learners and knowledge producers.

In this direction, we emphasize the importance of pedagogical actions that are carried out by participants in distance education to promote interaction in order to trigger others, so as to establish dialogues that generates advances in ways of thinking, promoting the reorganization of mental processes and consequently, producing new knowledge. We stress emphatically that in this new paradigm, the teachers of distance learning courses have not only its expanded responsibilities but also the challenge of breaking with the contradictions imposed by its cultural history, so as to see, perceive and understand the new ways of producing knowledge, and the strength of social practices that break the linearity of the network processes as a large "neural synapses" to generate movements that cause and produce knowledge and development.

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